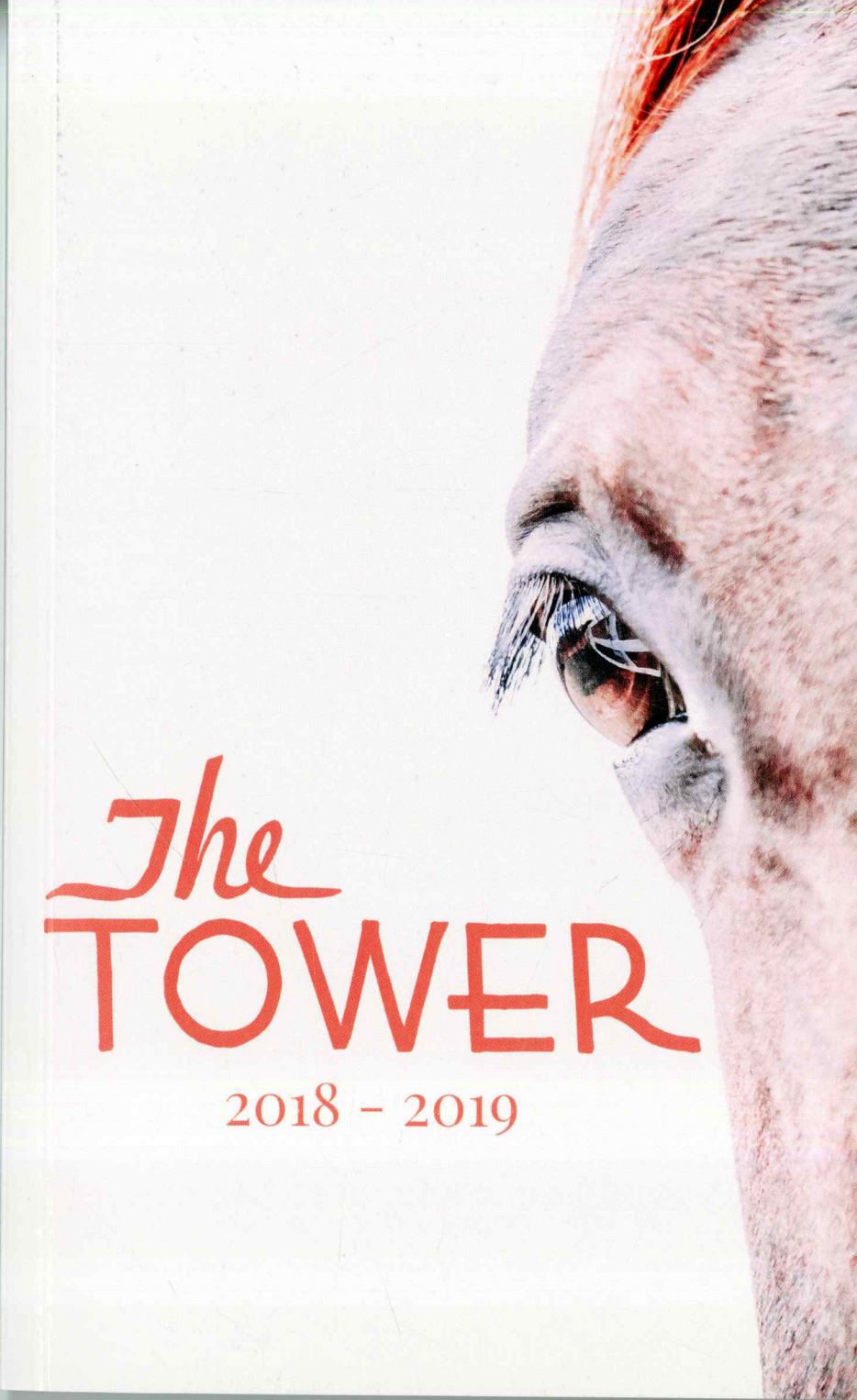

# The TOWER

2018 - 2019

# The TOWER

**University of Montevallo 2018 - 2019**

**Editor in Chief:**
Laura DeRocher

**Readers:**
Annika Bastian
Kaitlyn Shehee
Savannah Willard

**Layout:**
Laura DeRocher
Deidre Darby

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**tower@montevallo.edu**

# Letter from the Editor

When I first got this job, I was thrilled to death at the opportunity to "make something that would be a part of this school's history." At least, that's what I said in the press release. But let's get one thing straight: I'm not the one who made this journal what it is. The ones making history here are the artists and authors whose work you're about to see!

This university is an amazing place full of brilliant people with so many stories to tell, and all of these pieces are the result of their hard work and creativity. I could write at least forty more pages about my admiration for every single one of the students published here and their work, but that's not what anybody's here to read.

You're still here?
What are you waiting for?
Turn the page!

**Laura DeRocher**
**Editor-in-chief**

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**But then it stopped."**

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**"The storm is a flash
Of a red giant's flame
Against our houses
Inside our sky."**

**Hausdorff's Star Field**, Adella Herron

# Escalating Scales

**Julian Shelnutt**

I'm listening again.
I catch myself in the moment to see I'm listening to those songs again.
Yesterday it was love songs, tonight it's love songs again.
They used to always comfort me in hopes of
that magical "someday" but I realize now
they're so dreary.
I point to you.
The harsh sound of locusts in the night
even with the bedroom light I feel
I'm in the dark-
My heart points towards you.
From anywhere, I could be even halfway,
from the sea with its cold shores-
I hear the songs and point them to you.
You used to be my compass needle
with every song that played, that too,
is so hard to put down.
I can't seem to shake it off.
No, no, not yet.
The room is dark with the lights on.
The music picks up again and
I can hear the singer reach me across
the room and tell me it's okay.
She gets me, she comforts me, she wants me to hope-
I can only believe her for a moment before
I forget her and lose myself for the
fourth time today.
Tempo steady tempo-
Steady, steady, tempo.
Try to live in peace and it will never find you-
Try to rile up in anger and the crowd will never show-
Life is full of what you don't want
the mixed bag just gets passed around.

If you pick and choose you're
only gonna lose
so you might as well
settle down.
Accept enough hands and maybe you'll wake up
aces
instead of hoeing
with spades.
Love the lot and live to talk about it.

# Hausdorff's Star Field

**Adella Herron**

There exists a four-dimensional star field Y.

Distinct, disjoint
Beyond telescope's eye
Lonely both
Lonely two
Falling into the red star:
        Living you, you in Y
                Living I, I'm in Y
Lightbent, hellbent, I ignite
To build a house of burning sets—
Build them empty, built in torment
In a star field in which you lament.

Term by term
Second by second
Open to each other
(Open but complaisant)
        Disconnect you
                Dislocate I
The distant, compacted space
Between us erupts in Y.
The storm is a flash
Of a red giant's flame
Against our houses
Inside our sky
And we ask,
"Why did we ever love
The space between us—
Us in Y when we
Could have been unified?"

# Waiting

**Erica Lewis**

# Harionago

**Chelsea Yates**

Once there was a girl composed of flowers. Her breath smelled like roses. Every step swayed as if she had been dancing with the daffodils.

Men came from all over the world to ask for her hand in marriage. They had heard of this lovely creature who perfumed the very ground she walked on. Each frolic beckoned them closer. They longed to see her flash them a smile because her smiles shone like the sun. Her dancing became renowned.

The flower girl grew intoxicated with their praise and even as she turned them away, she beckoned them closer. She turned down the proposals; yet, she yearned for them to stay with her and keep her company at night because you see the girl composed of flowers grew lonely during the nighttime. Only the moon saw her beauty and watched as she danced by lamplight.

After a while the men grew tired of her games and dwindled one by one. The few remaining ones left asked the maiden why she refused each of their proposals. They would provide for her. They offered to shower her with the rarest of gifts. If she asked they would even test to see who was the strongest out of their ranks by fighting for her hand.

By then the maiden was too swollen with praise. She laughed and said, "I am the daughter of gods. Why should I marry one when I can have you all?"

The young man replied, gesturing at their small group, "But don't you see. We are the only ones left and soon we will leave too to carry out our own lives."

"Nonsense," She waved them off, "Be with me. Watch me and you will be content forever. Why carry on a meaningless existence without happiness? I am your dreams."

Before she even finished speaking he was already gone, dissuaded by her words. She was just that a dream and he would find his own happiness before trying to make someone else happy. All of her group left until there was only one.
The last one left ran up to her side saying, "I am the victor, the last one standing. My patience is fed up. Marry me or I will take you by force."

She glanced around with a face of bewilderment, "The last one left? Where are all the others? My admirers?"

He knew she had been focused solely on herself and paid little attention to the men slowly leaving her side, so he lied, "They are all dead. We slayed brothers, cousins, friends until there was only me, the man you are to marry. You are the sought after prize. Now give yourself to me in the name of all those who have fallen just to be by your side."

Upon hearing this, the girl composed of flowers wept. She thought what he said was the truth; however, she did not blame herself. She blamed him and once again, for the final time, denied him her hand in marriage. He cursed her so that her flowers leaked poison, every branch upon her hands and torso grew thorns, and any who inhaled her putrid stench would die.

The maiden begged for her parents, the gods, to forgive her for whatever transgressions she suffered from. It is said that they have forsaken her and that she died in solitude without anyone ever basking in her company again. The man who cursed her died from the same poisonous fumes he inflicted on her. She is now called harionago, the barbed woman.

# Remembering

**Olivia Gonzalez**

# To You, Our Daughter

**Linda Hunt**

Spring forth sweet flood of life from love and loin!
Yet take due heed: this is no easy place.
In this time, sense and reason do not join.
Still, be not the gentle heart that they chase
And use false words to make you into prey,
Instead, transform into a lioness.
Let your roaring wave wash them all away.
Tis true, my love for you I do confess:
Devotion now before thy invention
That will, no doubt, follow me to my grave.
You do not owe us an explanation
For your life unto you freely we gave.
Behold what love from me you would inspire
If you were true and not just a desire.

**L.H.**

# River Lea

**Rachel Wurstner**

I stumbled in the afterglow of stadium lights,
Exhalation kidnapped by the rose of your cheeks;
Honeysuckle lips, a soul radiating the color of thunder,
My heels no longer above my eyes, I could hardly capture
All the marvelous majesty in front of me.

Pupils dilated, fascinated by the details,
Your uneven hairline and galactic skin,
Your freckles like constellations
Speckled onto your face—I was stargazing
With every glimpse of you.

You despised suburban streets and jasmine candles,
Unadulterated coffee, patterned socks, and driving after dusk.
You believed waffles were best served at midnight,
The greatest dogs should be heavier than you,
And love letters are required to be saved.

Fingertips intertwined through belt-loops,
Your hair caught in my mouth,
Brown eyes honey in the golden hour glow,
I was enamored with every inch of your existence,
The lightness, the darkness, every crevice between.

Marking off the days 'til I could see you next
Felt like counting backwards from infinity.
Your presence was my favorite season;
The feet between us, the sensation of hemispheres,
I could never wait to embrace your solstice warmth again.

As the sunset watercolored the hazy sky,
Holding hands on the boardwalk of a muggy swamp,
You were my summertime breeze in late October,
A sweet song poured like syrup through my ears,

The melody stuck to my brain, swore I'd never forget it.
But then it stopped.
No reply.
My number blocked.
You cut your hair in the winter.

# Overload

**William Wallace**

# The Dreadnaught

**Harrison Neville**

The Summit was always a festive place, full of cheerful shoppers and young couples on first dates. That evening was no exception; the twinkling lights seemed to beckon to the youthful of heart, begging them to come and spend a little— time or money, it didn't matter. Yet through those bright lights, a shadow moved, and a tremor of anticipation moved against the current of blissful joy.

The shadow was draped about the shoulders of a large man, who towered above all those around him. He was known as The Dreadnaught, and he was hunting death.

The Dreadnaught's quarry was sitting at a coffee table at Barnes and Noble, flipping through a fantasy novel, a slight smile on his face. A wave of hate swept over The Dreadnaught as he took in the way the former warrior mage was enjoying himself. He didn't deserve to be happy. It was hard to decide what he hated the man for the most: his participation in the death of his mother, or the fact that he didn't kill him when he had the chance.

The Dreadnaught could think of a dozen different ways that he could easily kill his prey without ever setting foot inside the store, but that wasn't what he wanted. There would be death that night, his or the mage's; he didn't care which. He was more than content to wait. He leaned back against the brick wall of Barnes and Noble, blending in with the shadows, and waited.

Two hours later the mage emerged, still smiling, a bag full of books in his hand. He walked down the lamplit sidewalk, a spring in his step and a smile on his face. He crossed the street and began the ascent into the lower half of the Summit, he did not see the large shadow detach itself from the wall outside Barnes and Noble. On the steps below him, a young girl was sobbing her eyes out over a pair of reading glasses with bent frames. The mage rushed down the steps toward her, gallantly pulling out a handkerchief as he went.

"Shhh, shhh— it's alright, what's the matter?"
He asked her.

"Th-the frames... they were m-m-my grandmother's," the girl sobbed, "and I-I've g-g-g-go-gone and broken them!"

"Here now, they can't be that bad, let's see if I can do something with them." He said, scooping up the glasses and turning away.

Only the Dreadnaught saw the mage's lips moving and the slight spark that flew from his fingers.

The mage turned back to face the girl the glasses in his hand, minus the lenses, but otherwise restored. The girl stopped crying and stared at them in disbelief, her eyes widening in shock. She mutely accepted the handkerchief he offered her and dried her eyes, then he helped her to her feet. She smiled shakily at him and tried to give him the handkerchief, but he pressed it back into her hand.

"Keep it," he said.

"Thank you," she whispered.

He smiled at her one last time, then continued on his way down the steps. The girl watched him go, the dazed smile still on her face, then she shivered, and a shadow briefly blotted out the lights coming from above. She spun around, a scream frozen in her throat, expecting to see a man behind her, but there was nothing, and the shadow was gone. The girl shivered, wondering why she had felt so scared, then she rushed up the stairs clutching her grandmother's glasses like a protective talisman.

Unaware of the danger stalking him, the mage stopped at the base of the stairwell and looked back up at the stairs. He'd loved this view since the first time he saw it; it was exactly the way that he'd always pictured Rivendell to look. He gazed up at the stairs entwined with light, not noticing the dark shadow that looked down at him from the balcony. Still smiling, the mage turned away and walked into the plaza below.

The plaza was empty; silent except for the quiet gurgle of the fountain. Here, with no witnesses beyond the chirping crickets, the Dreadnaught decided that it was time. He lifted the magic he'd been using to mask his aura, and the mage immediately spun around, his eyes roving the shadows. They quickly settled upon the looming figure standing half hidden, between the shadows and the light.

"You," he whispered.

"Me," said the Dreadnaught, striding forward.

For a moment the two men stood facing one another—the mage tense and nervous, the Dreadnaught calm and cold. The Dreadnaught broke the silence first.

"There are some who would say that what you just did was an unnecessary risk," he said, gesturing towards the stairs where the girl with the broken glasses had been.

The mage smiled faintly. "Please don't tell me that you're here to lecture me on the dangers of exposing magic, because I won't believe you," he said.

The Dreadnaught said nothing, and the two men stood there, sizing each other up. Eventually, the mage broke the silence.

"After all this time, I must admit that I hoped you had given up on finding me," he said.

" I was always going to find you," said the Dreadnaught.

"I am so sorry for what I did to you," said the mage," but please listen to me— I am not the man I once was, I have changed. I realize that I have no right to ask for mercy but—"

The Dreadnaught said nothing, and continued to stare at the mage.

"But I have started a new life, I have a family, and I do not wish to leave them behind."

"Then kill me," said the Dreadnaught.

"Please," said the mage, "Spare me."

The Dreadnaught stared at him for several long seconds, then spoke.

"Kill me."

"You are heartless," said the mage.

The Dreadnaught stripped off his long overcoat, revealing the massive sword concealed on his back. The rasp of leather seemed to sharpen the night, bringing out the harshness in both the shadows and the light.

"I do not wish to die," whispered the mage.

"That is where you and I differ," said the Dreadnaught, and he strode forward.

The expression on the mage's face twisted with anger and a torrent of words fell from his lips, cracking against the ground and sending sparks of defiance into the night. All around them, dreadful creatures rose up from the earth or

swooped down from the sky, and directed their fury upon the Dreadnaught. The Dreadnaught never slowed his step, he walked straight through all the illusions, unfazed by their wrath.

The mage raised his hands and the night was lit with flashing lights. The Dreadnaughts sword became a blur in his hands, moving impossibly fast, catching lightning bolts and deflecting fireballs. He ran towards his opponent, leaping and spinning to avoid the bushes that reached out to grab him with twisty fingers, and dove to the ground as a massive fireball rushed towards his face. The crickets cowered and the birds fled. Only the dancing ripples of shadows and dashes of light remained.

As the Dreadnaught closed in on his opponent, the mage gave a fierce scream of rage and desperation; he slashed at the air and it split before him. The two warriors leapt forward at the same time. The mage disappeared and the Dreadnaught's sword cleaved through empty space just as the mage reappeared behind the Dreadnaught, a ruby hilted sword held with both hands. The mage swung for the Dreadnaught's neck, and too fast for the eye to follow, the Dreadnaught twisted around catching the stroke across his shoulder with the pommel of his sword. Then spun his sword like a baton, breaking the lock. The ruby-hilted sword slid across the Dreadnaught's left arm, and the mage opened his mouth to utter a spell. The Dreadnaught swept sword upward and sliced the mage in half.

The ruby-hilted sword struck the ground with a clang—its master followed with less noise. The Dreadnaught looked down at his opponent, gave a sigh of disappointment and turned to walk away. Behind him, the shadows and light lay still, present in equal measures.

# Yew Cork Nity

**Rilee Garrett**

# Unfortunate Encounters

**Abbey Rothfeldt**

"Alright, you have a good one too Phil! Uh-huh, bye now," the man said, rolling his eyes as he ended the call. He stuck his phone into his pocket, taking advantage of this transition moment to do a quick self-assessment. He adjusted his crisp white cuff sleeves, carefully checking that they were in place but still remained casual. He ran his hand around the collar of his shirt leaving the top button undone while looking into the mirror hanging on the wall in the seemingly empty hallway. He noted how the gold ornate frame seemed out of place next to the dated floral wallpaper. He ran two fingers around his waist ban, checking to make sure that the shirt was tucked in at all corners. Glancing down, he noticed the small table in front of him held a beautiful arrangement of blue hydrangeas. Smirking, he ran a petal between his fingers, chuckling to himself as he confirmed the plant was fake. Turning his attention back to his reflection, he bared his teeth checking for remnants of his kale and quinoa salad from lunch. He dusted the nonexistent lint from his broad shoulders and ran his fingers through his short brown hair. He looked hard into his green eyes, a grimace making his sharp jawline seemingly jaunt from his cheekbones. Suddenly, a smile broke across his face.

"Thomas Johnson, you're a beautiful fucking bastard," he boomed, and he began to make his way to the elevators. The dingy orange carpet held the odor of dirty carpet cleaner water, growing stronger as he continued down the long hall. Thomas pressed the brassy down button, noting the smudges on the semi-reflective door. He ran his fingers through his hair once more, attempting to get the perfect angle for his front hairs to stand at. His usual stylist, Katherine, had been out of town last time he was home resulting in a single floppy stand of hair continuously falling into his eyes. He had just gotten it to stand perfectly when the door dinged its arrival. Thomas shook the tension out of his shoulders and took a step back, placing the appropriate amount of distance between him and the possible current occupant. The doors dinged twice, opened and revealed

a woman. Thomas instinctively took her all in: the boot-like heels, the rose dress and a small silver watch that was held on by a black leather strap. He continued moving his eyes up the woman's body to her chest, his eyes lingering on her protruding collar bones, then her face. Her eyes were a little glassy, and she looked slightly flushed, her whole chest a light pink. Before he could even get a chance to notice her eye color, she had breezed passed him, a slight excuse me escaping from her dark red lips. He stuck his hand in the door and moved in the cubby, automatically reaching for the close-door button. Before the door fully closed, he saw the woman glance over her shoulder, searching for one last detail.

Entering a hotel lobby had always been such a thrill to Thomas. He loved entering just about any room, having the eyes of strangers linger on him. He could feel an entire group of people size him up and determine whether or not his presence was worth their time. In five seconds, an entire room would either want to know more about the new stranger, or that person would become yet another fading memory, left for the subconscious to play with in the deeper REM dreams. The hotel lobby was an even more extreme version of the his standard entrance scenario. There, in a hotel lobby, strangers were aplenty—meaning you really had to make a statement to be recognized. In the more extreme version, it would seem that the stakes were higher, and the time is shorter. Thomas was well aware of all this, though. His years of selling high-end real estate gave him plenty of travel opportunities, meaning plenty of lobbies to enter. He had spent the past decade of his life constantly moving from state to state, city to city, hotel room to hotel room. He was no stranger to this single serving lifestyle. Thomas not only was aware of this, but he had also perfected it. He knew how to stroll off the elevator, at a leisurely pace to ensure no one thought him to be late, given that this would reflect poorly on his own character. He knew how to turn up just half of his mouth in

order to create the perfect half smile, almost ensured to make the average woman swoon and maybe a nice looking fella back in the summer of '82. Keep your hands in your pocket to continue the aloof and casual look, but be sure to leave your wrist out enough to spot the $3,627 Omega watch shipped from Italy with the matching $2,863 gold band shipped from South Korea (a risky buy to say the least). With shoulders back, eyes ahead and slightly out of focus, Thomas glided past the lobby straight into the hotel bar.

He entered the bar, assessing the few faces around the room. It was a Wednesday, so it made sense there was not a large crowd. He walked over to the bar, sitting in a spot that left him in the perfect viewing spot of the entrance.

"Scotch, on the rocks, a double, sir," Thomas absent mindedly said as he slid a $20 bill to the bartender. The server nodded his head, sliding the bill into his pocket. Thomas watched as he set the thick crystal on a napkin, the hotel logo diluting as the ice and amber liquid filled the glass. The two exchanged tight smiles, and the bartender let him be. Thomas picked up the glass, making notice of the weight. It was real crystal, something that you don't see in most bars any more. As he took a sip of the drink, the liquid burning his throat, he took in the sights the night offered him. The dusty light fixtures cast grave lighting over the actors of the night. At the opposite end of the bar sat an elderly woman, her purple veins too visible considering their distance. Her dentures were yellowed and her dyed auburn hair flat. The bartender would go stand at her end keep her company. Every time she cackled, Thomas saw the bartender smile. Touching, he thought to himself sarcastically. Sitting at a table was an obese woman, by herself. Her tight pink and white striped shirt stretched over her bulges, her sweat staining darkly along the creases. Thomas quickly turned his eyes. It would be considered rude for staring, or, even worse, his stare may be confused for something more. Thomas pushed his back to fully press the chair, causing him to straighten his posture.

He was bringing his glass to his lips for another sip when he saw a new form making their way onto the scene. She did not come from the entrance but maybe the bathroom? Possibly the kitchen? It did not really matter. Thomas saw immedi-

ately it was the woman from the elevator. As the young woman moved towards her seat, she kept her head ducked, eyes trained on the ground, her bangs shielding her face as she passed. Thomas watched her wade through the tables, barely catching herself as she tripped over a table leg. She took her spot at a table set for two. She smoothed the napkin in her lap and took a visibly deep breath. As she exhaled, she looked up, her eyes immediately meeting his. Startled by the intimate moment, Thomas jerked his head away. His hand clenched around his drink as he could feel the woman continue to stare at him. It was an inquisitive look, he thought, and he knew she was remembering him from before. He took a slow sip, determined to look back at her, even if for just a moment. Holding the glass was good, it gave him something to do with his hands. His empty hand instinctively ran through his hair. He swallowed hard and slowly returned his eyes to her. Her cheeks and chest still had a rose touch to them. Her hair was pulled back with pieces falling lose around her face and nape of her neck, her bangs loosely framing her face. Her eyes were dark and large, complimenting her fair skin and dark hair. They were glassy, which indicated to him that she had been crying earlier. But there was something about her eyes, seemingly wise. They seemed haunted by past events that were incomprehensible to even the most twisted of minds. She wore a dress covered in roses that clung to her body yet still seemed a size too big. Thomas felt the need to go talk to her, to ask her to tell him a story, specifically her story, to see if she was as extraordinary as she appeared. He wanted to know her greatest passions, her darkest secrets, her wildest memories. The woman sat, staring at her hands as she messed with the seam of the napkin in her lap. She shifted her weight to her left, then her right. She uncrossed her legs, then recrossed them in the opposite direction. She pushed the hair out of her face and glanced at the dainty silver watch on her wrist. Thomas watched the woman as he continued to sip his drink. He could not help his stare as he tried to memorize everything about her appearance. It wasn't unlike Thomas to daydream (he had received many past scoldings regarding his imagination), but there was more to this woman. Her finger nail polish was chipped, her shoes were scuffed up, and there was a run in her hosiery; yet, Thomas could not dissuade his interest in her. He had begun wistfully

thinking of who she was; a school teacher, a librarian, a banker, when she was in front of him. The woman had approached the bar and was waiting for the bartender to notice her. She held her driver's license and a $20 bill in her hand. Draining the rest of his glass, Thomas stood up, turned up half of his mouth in order to create the perfect half smile, and approached the woman in the rose dress.

**II.**

The single ding of the elevator indicated that the doors were closed, she was sure of it. Glancing back over her shoulder, she saw the eyes of a stranger get sealed into the mini coffin known as an elevator. The quiet swoosh was enough to send Ray into a full panic. With a gasping sob, she leaned against the wall, and sank into the floor. Her legs were putty, her lungs on fire, and her head in a cloud from the three rapid-fire shots she had just taken. She had never been stood up. Not by a man, not by a friend, not by a single person, ever. She had never had to tell a waiter not once, not twice, but three times that you were sure that your dinner date was on their way. She looked at her hands in her lap, shaking. Ray leaned her head back against the wall, her eyes closed. She let out a shaky breath and went to stand. She put her hand on table she had squatted next to to offer her support. To her surprise, the blooming vase of hydrangeas she was expecting the table to be weighed down by turned out to be fake, making the table vastly too unsteady for her and sending her tumbling to the floor. Ray rolled her eyes seeing the seam had ripped in her hose crating a giant run up the back of her leg. Much more careful, Ray stood again, taking note of just how wobbly her legs felt. She turned to face the mirror hanging on the wall and immediately clasped a hand over her mouth to stop from audibly laughing at herself. Her hair was sticking up in about six different directions, completely frizzed, her mascara created dark streaks down her face, and she looked a little hallow because she got the dress from the thrift store earlier that day. She stared into the dark swirls of her eyes, questioning how she had let things get as bad as they had with Teague. Ray closed her eyes again.

They were in love for two years— until he just wasn't anymore. The day before their two-year anniversary, he had

the audacity to show up at their home and ask her to leave. She packed her bags and left the stuffed peppers to burn in the oven. It was their favorite meal, the first thing he had taught her to cook. The first time they prepared it, he had to rush her to the hospital because she had almost sliced off the end of her pinky. That night, as she was drifting off into a drug induced slumber, she remembered hearing Teague say I love you before his lips brushed against hers.

A sob escaped Ray's throat but was followed by a shaky deep breath, her hands resting on her stomach. When she opened her eyes again, they were hardened. She wiped the mascara off her face and pulled her hair into a loose bun. She still looked frizzy and a little crazed, but Ray felt like she could stand once more. After straightening the vase on the table, she turned and moved towards the stairwell, resolved to leave the tears in the ghastly orange carpeting.

Walking was harder than Ray expected. After one almost complete wipeout in the stairwell and a brief stumble walking into the dining room, Ray could finally collapse into the chair at her table back at the hotel bar. Sitting down, she took in the sight in front of her. There were three shot glasses, all consumed in the span of six minutes (that's the fastest the bartender could serve her, he said). There was her water glass, condensation pooling around the base. A roll sat cut open, heavily buttered, uneaten. The seat opposite was pristine, the silverware still rolled and glasses still edge down. Ray could feel her stomach drop, realizing what a scene this had truly become. She took a deep breath and lifted her head, prepared to ask the waiter for a drink, fully intending to spend the last $40 in her wallet on an evening of wine and liquor. She was startled to see a man at the bar staring directly at her. Their eyes met, but he quickly jerked his head away. His green eyes pierced her mind, even as he continued to look forward. Those were the eyes from the elevator that she had flung herself out of only ten minutes prior, she had no doubt. She felt her heart stop momentarily, her breathing as well. The hair on the back of her neck stood, her adrenaline pumping. And then the moment of tension broke. She redirected her gaze, feeling her body flush as she inhaled again. She could not help but wonder what had just occurred. Who was this man, sitting at the bar? Why did he seem to be

staring into the pit of her stomach? She felt his eyes on her once more, her skin becoming covered in goosebumps. She was unsure as to why this reaction was occurring, how a person's look alone would stir such a response? Surely she was just emotional from the turn of events her evening had taken. He probably just was laughing that she sat alone, wondering when she hadn't left, hadn't given up on the delusion that a date was coming. Ray could tell that he was still staring at her, making the moment even more uncomfortable for her. She began picking at the skin the around her thumb nail bed, half aware of the burning sensation. She shifted her weight to her left, then her right. She uncrossed her legs, then recrossed them in the opposite direction. Still feeling slightly unsettled, she began to readjust her hair, all the while, the green eyes tracing her every shift, every stretch, every movement. She began wondering how long had he been looking at her? She had been wrapped in her own thought for so long that there was no telling. Had he followed her here? Being more observant was something Ray always thought she needed to work on, and tonight seemed to reiterate that point. She glanced down at the watch on her wrist. The time did not work on it, but that was not the purpose of her watch. While looking at the face of the nonworking watch, Ray could not help but to grow in those few seconds. She did not grow into a better person or develop a better understanding but rather grew in her resolve. She resolved that this was a moment in which she would take control of. Maybe it was the alcohol or maybe the fact she felt that she had been controlled for so long, but Ray stood dramatically, the napkin falling from her lap. Confidently, she took her first step forward, hoping muscle memory would kick in to continue to propel her towards the bar. The gleaming granite counter reflected her face back to her as she stepped up. Ray could not help but to feel like an underage girl, trying to buy a drink in this moment, her nerves making her quiver ever so slightly. The lights seemed to work as an interrogation lamp as she approached, adding to her nervous energy. Carefully setting her arms on the top of the counter, she leaned forward allowing herself to rest against the cool stone. As she stared at the back of the bartender's head who was speaking to a nice elderly woman at one end of the bar, she saw in the corner of her eye the man make some sort of movement. She refused to turn her head to

the left, trying to remain a distant figment, difficult to figure out. She smiled slightly thinking about how this went against every part of her being, but she found herself enjoying it. It was if she were in a movie, a beautiful actress playing the role of a mysterious lady living a separate life. As Ray continued to imagine the type of woman she could portray for the evening, she felt a hand on her elbow. Without turning around, she knew who to expect to be looking at her with those piercing green eyes.

**III.**

Thomas opted for the elbow touch, unsure of how the woman would respond to any other type of touch. As she turned around, there was already a smile spread across her lips.

"Hello," she said, in a breathy almost-whisper. Thomas was surprised to see her eyes up close were actually grey, like the swirls in the marble countertop.

"What are you drinking tonight?" he asked, dropping his hand from her side.

"A cosmo was my goal, but I can have whatever you're having?" she said, lifting her eyebrows in the direction of his now empty cup. Signaling to the bartender, Thomas was able to catch his attention and stuck two fingers in the air. After receiving the thumbs up, he redirected his attention to the woman.

"So," he started, "let's go simple first. What's your name?" He leaned back on a stool that was behind him. He crossed his arms, glancing down to make sure his watch was visible to his audience, to the pretty woman, to the bartender who was bringing the drinks to them. She smiled as he set the drink down in front of her, taking it into her hand and swishing the liquid around the cup, the ice cubes tinkling. He watched as she pulled a napkin from behind the counter, sticking it under the already damp glass.

"I'm Ray, yes, like the sunshine," Ray said, extending a hand forward. Her fingers were covered in rings, her wrists both stacked with bracelets framing that little silver watch. Her polish was even more chipped up close.

He took her hand into his and replied, "Thomas, the pleasure is mine, Miss Ray of Sunshine." He took a sip of his drink, looking at her over the top of his glass. She had a little bald patch in her left eyebrow, her nose curved lightly to the

right, and she had a mole above her lip. Her teeth looked perfect and white, framed by her wide dark lips.

"And what do you do?" he asked as the glass clinked back on the counter. There was a long pause as she took a sip of her drink, trying to hide the after shudder that he knew was shaking her spine.

"I was a student, but recently graduated," she responded. It seemed as though there was going to be more to the statement, but she left the response hanging, unwilling to give further detail. He looked at the necklace around her neck. It had a small stone on it, the type he was not sure.

"What about you?" she asked, regaining his attention.

"I sell real estate, mostly commercial, for multibillion dollar companies," he responded, waiting for the gasps or oohs of the impressed women that he had grown accustomed to. Ray, however. did not seem amused.

"What does that mean?" she asked, her tone expressing what she was not saying.

Thomas readjusted his perch on the edge of the stool and stared at the ground momentarily before saying, "You know, real estate." With a grandiose gesture around him, "Properties like this one, where companies want to expand their location." He smiled as his voice seemed to echo off the wood around him. Ray looked around the bar, obviously critiquing the setting. Thomas, who had actually helped sell this property to the current owners, could feel himself become self-conscious, on the defense. He looked up to see the vaulted ceilings seemed to be covered in a thick layer of dust and grime. Was it supposed to be white or grey? He was unsure. The overhang of the bar made it feel claustrophobic, the mirror was cracked, and the tile did not match throughout the entire space. He looked back and could tell she was not convinced.

"What did you study?" he asked, searching for a subject change, something to distract from an apparent flaw he just developed. He was not used to a woman not responding positively to his job title or his charm, but Ray seemed immune to both. But wait, did she have two different earrings in? That does not make sense, he thought to himself. How do you put one on and not the other matching? He took a sip of his drink and noticed for the first time her nose was pierced. She must be young,

that's why she didn't appreciate his work. She just didn't understand it was all. He smirked and leaned back in his seat. Ray continued to stand, still leaning slightly onto the counter, her elbow forming a perfect 45 degree angle.

"I studied music, performance specifically," she replied, her face not really smiling anymore.

"What kind of performance?" he persisted.

"Piano. I played for ten years, so it seemed like the logical thing to do, continue my studies, you know?" she replied flatly, her words rushed. Her eyes seemed to go out of focus for a second. The silence hung in the air, stiff and uncomfortable. There was a chip in her front tooth, and her voice was kind of nasally. He was unsure if the woman was unhappy about the topic or the conversation partner. He could feel the uneasy silences growing longer and longer, and he began to regret buying the woman a drink. As if hearing his thoughts, she drank the rest of her drink in a single gulp. This time she shuddered visibly, closing her eyes and exhaling sharply.

"I appreciate the drink," she began, her voice trailing off. Was this it, the man thought to himself? He stood up and immediately regretted it. She was much shorter than him and his presence was overwhelming suddenly. Taking a step back in attempt to give her space, he knocked the barstool into the counter, having all eyes turn on the duo. Thomas could feel his face turning bright red as it was not often that he had to feel rejection, let alone from a little girl like this. The faces of the strangers begun to turn away, not interested in Thomas Johnson any longer. His five seconds were over, the final judgements made. He was just to be another faceless person in someone's dream. He clenched his jaw, thinking about how this must look to an outsider. Ray was staring at the ground, saying something, but he was unable to hear it. His whole stature looming over such a small human. His heart was pumping, as if he had run around the bar seven times and done forty push-ups.

"Well, you just have a good night then," Thomas blurted out, cutting Ray off. His abruptness visibly startled her, and her eyes cut from the ground to his face, shining with tears in the brim. Before he could say anything, she blinked and they were gone. He looked into her eyes, seeing they had changed. They were dark and hard as stone, showing nothing of her inner self

to the world, to him. The vulnerable woman he saw not even five minutes before had become a complete stranger to him once more.

**IV.**

Ray darted away from the bar, into her compact Subaru, and let out another sob. Her chest was beginning to concave, she just knew it. She couldn't keep crying like this and expect to actually remain standing, could she? Her body was shaking, her hands clenching the steering wheel of the turned off vehicle, her knuckles turning white.

"Okay, okay, okay," she mumbled to herself rubbing her hands across her hot cheeks, smearing the mascara and tears the rest of the way across her face. She looked at her reflection in the rearview mirror and made no effort to contain her maniacal cackle.

"What a fucking *NIGHT*!" she shrieked the last word, digging through her purse. It was filled with gum wrappers, condoms, a plethora of lip shades and even a pair of headphones that actually worked. She dug around tampons and Kleenex, a pack of crackers and an address notebook she'd had since ninth grade. She sifted through the essential oils, loose earrings, and random bangles that filled the crannies of her purse. With an exasperated sigh, she turned the purse upside down, dumping the contents in the passenger seat. Old receipts and forgotten Skittles fell to the floorboard of her car. Finally, Ray found the object of her quest: a lighter. With a heavy sigh, she lit a cigarette and turned her car on. Her battery must have reset because non of her radio stations were saved anymore and the clock was off the correct time. She looked at the lighter in her hand, noticing for the first time that it was a white lighter. She rolled her window down and threw it as hard as she could. She knew that she must have been jinxed that night, and she finally had found the source.

"Whatever, whatever, whatever," she mumbled, the lit cigarette hanging from her lips as she dug through a bunch of CD cases. She wasn't exactly sure when it happened, but tears had begun to fall down Ray's face once more. With a snicker, she had found the CD she wanted, tossing all the other rejects into the floor board. Sticking the CD in the radio, she turned

the volume to the max 40 and rolled all the rest of her windows down. It was night, but Ray pulled on her favorite pair of yellow sunglasses, the ones that made her feel like Hunter S. Thompson. She slammed her foot on the gas just as the first note of Black Sabbath blasted through her speakers. Her car screeched forward, almost inaudible over the thumping of the bass. Ray flew, running stop signs and ignoring speed limits. Her tires ran over a curb and she even swerved off the road a time or two. Her thoughts were racing even faster than the car, and she was having a hard time of making sense of it all. She did not like Thomas, the multibillion dollar real estate agent. She did not like Teague, the horribly controlling ex-boyfriend. She did not like dark liquor. She did not like working on group projects. She did not like that her mom was getting remarried for the third time. She did not like that she graduated with a useless degree. She did not like sleazy hotel bars. She did not like Thomas. She did not like Thomas. She did not—

Ray opened her eyes, her head throbbing. She tried to turn her head, but everything seemed to be in slow motion. She saw broken glass and big pieces of white cloth all around her. She looked down, horrified to see her chest covered in blood. Ray slowly looked out the windshield, unable to move any other part of her body. She saw the front end of her car smashed into a v, partially wrapped around a telephone pole. Ray stared, her ears ringing. Her whole body was cold, her whole body shaking. Or she was just terrified, she couldn't tell which. She continued to sit and to stare, thinking about nothing. She felt the blood drip from behind her ear onto her collarbone, she could see the lights of the ambulance approaching, she could smell the gasoline of her car leaking. Ray continued to sit, unable to move. As the paramedics flooded the scene, as the police ran around and as doctors waved their lights in her face, Ray never spoke. She sat and she thought and she thought and she sat. She could not remember what happened. She could not tell them what time she left the bar. She did not know how she made it as fas as she did. And as the third doctor came in to check if Ray had a concussion, the doctor said her eyes changed. As people continued to ask Ray if she was alright, she felt her resolve grow once more and she hardened herself like that cool marble bar.

# Body In Three Acts

**Candace Herron**

I. Childhood

It remembers the sweetness of leg pumps on swing sets
Tucked in on the back swing;
Stick straight, like cordwood, on the up.
When it learned to lean into the wind,
higher and faster and higher
until
levitation.
It remembers smoothly skinning cats without fear
Bare thighs and small callous hands
gripping the sun warm monkey bar.
Then head over feet over head,
pitched backward toward the earth.
Before
landing.

II. Adolescence

Fear, it knows now
and shame.
With the blood came secrets.
Growth equaled scars. Tissue shed and skin twisted.

All that grace
supplanted by awkwardness.
Its own innards
questionable
and untrustworthy.

None of this was wished for.
It only wished the world could be kinder
as it unwillingly
grew wings.

III. Adulthood

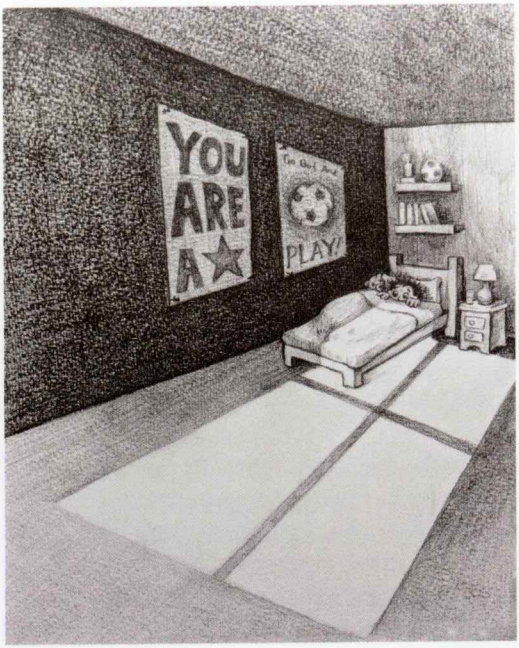
It begins the long road of reclamation.
It starts with the skin.
Carefully removing each wrongly inserted
instrument of self-hate,
Like splinters, infected, they must be gouged
out onto the surface.
Examined, origin determined,
and then destroyed.

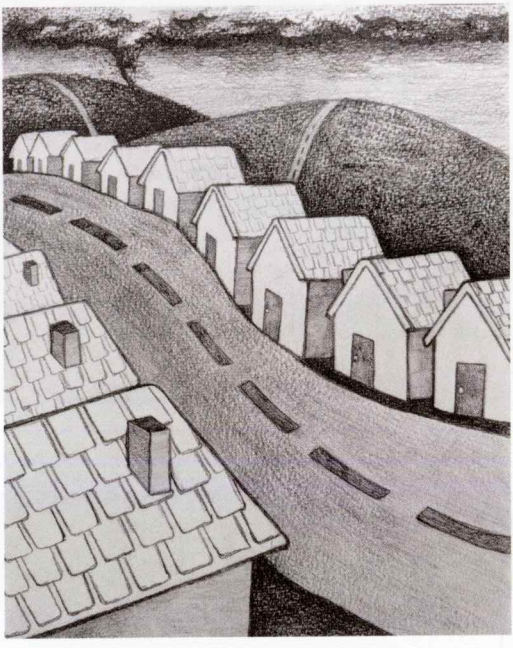
Moving on to the nerves,
it finds courage in their power.
Strong enough to have carried
men further than their mothers.
Resilient enough to lift a head and neck
burdened to the brim with self-doubt,
not once, not twice,
but over and over
each day.

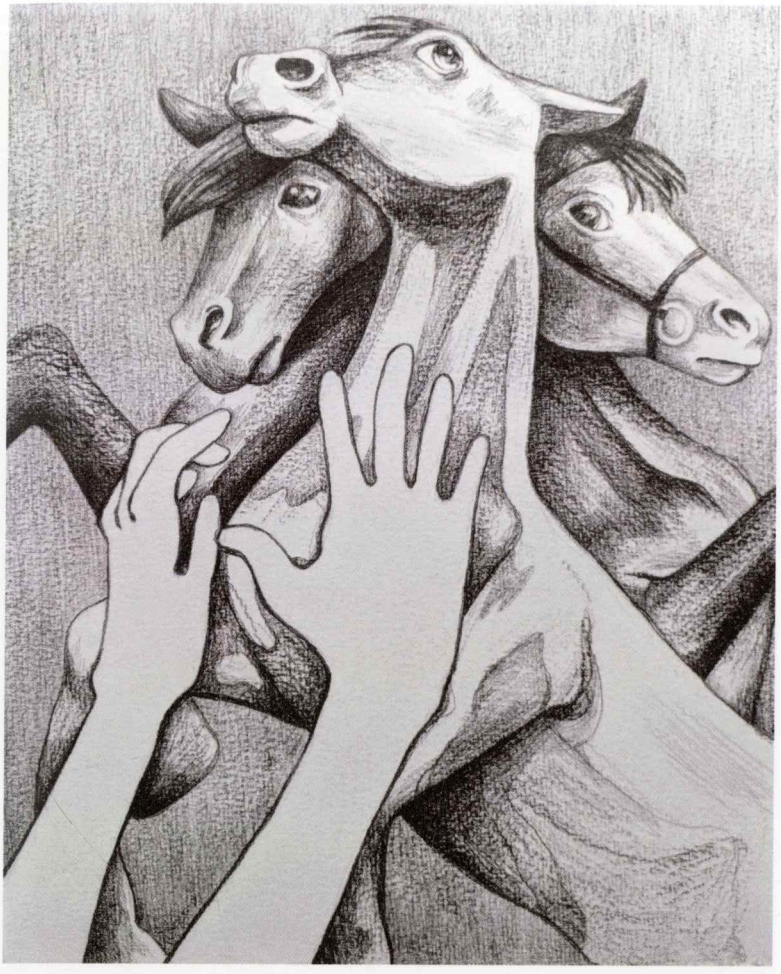
Finally, it rests against the bones.
A foundation built of calcium,
constructed and lengthened from within itself. It takes the time to love each
white, brittle, piece of framework.
It fuses each fracture with forgiveness.

The wings are especially tricky.

Healed.
It leans into the wind,
and takes flight.


YOU
ARE
A
PLAY!



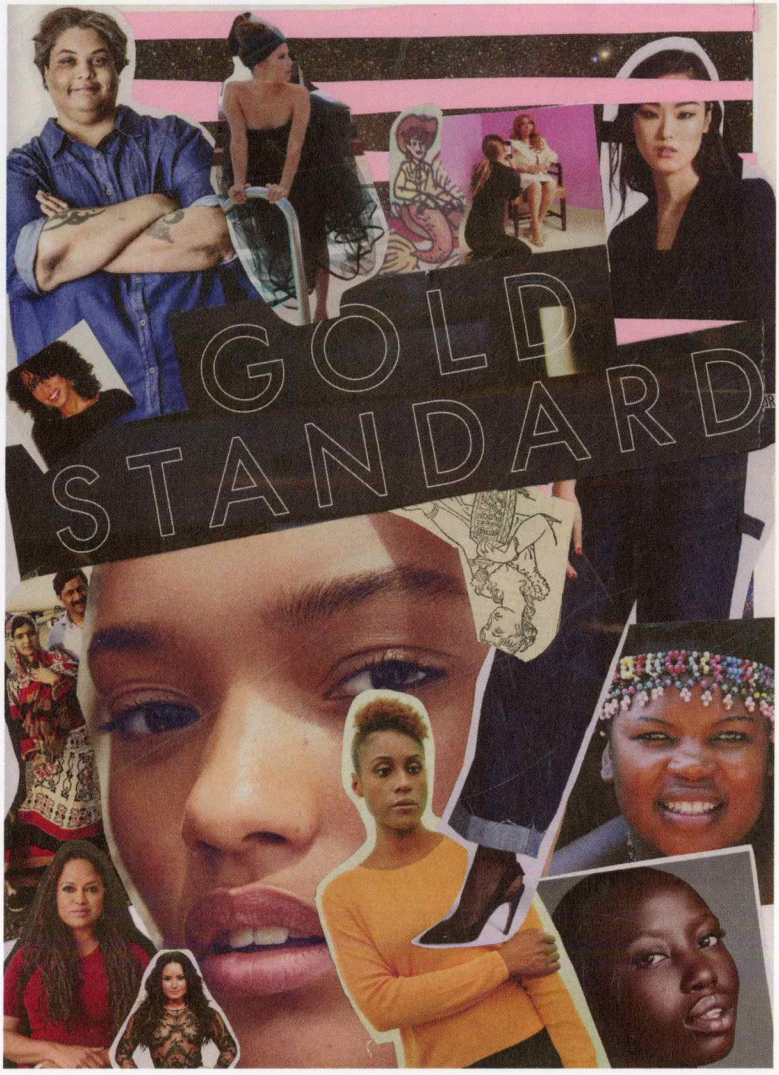


# Before the Storm

**Audrey Mecke**

# The Bluest Eye

**Abbey Rothfeldt**



# Hopes Fade

**Danielle Tetro**

We may experience *Shattered Trust* as we are

Unable to get help with our *Childhood Trauma* and

It gets so hard *When You Can't Express Your Feelings*

We need to know *How to Finally Stop Sexual Harassment at Work*

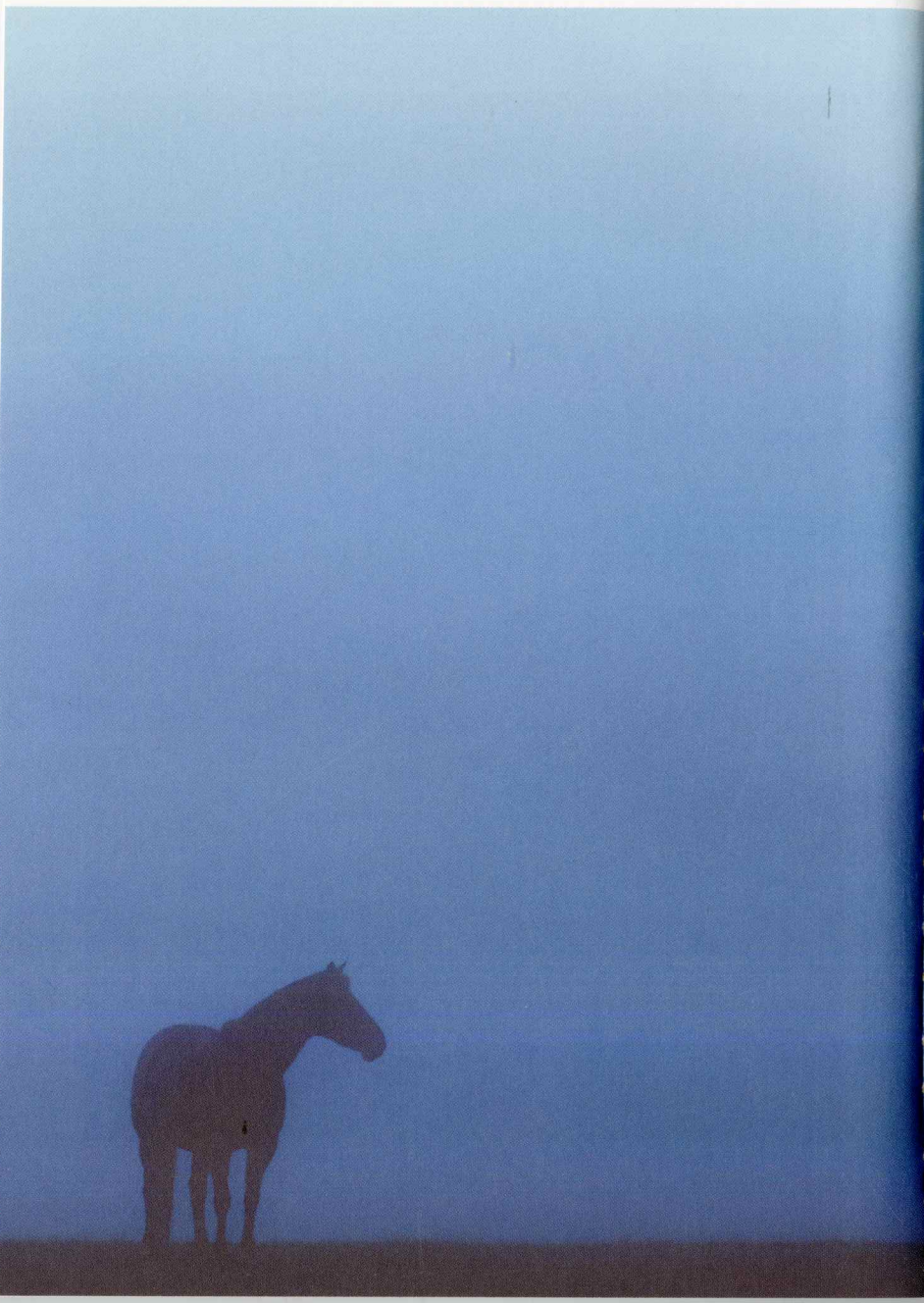
And keep *Addressing Sexual Assault in College Sports* because

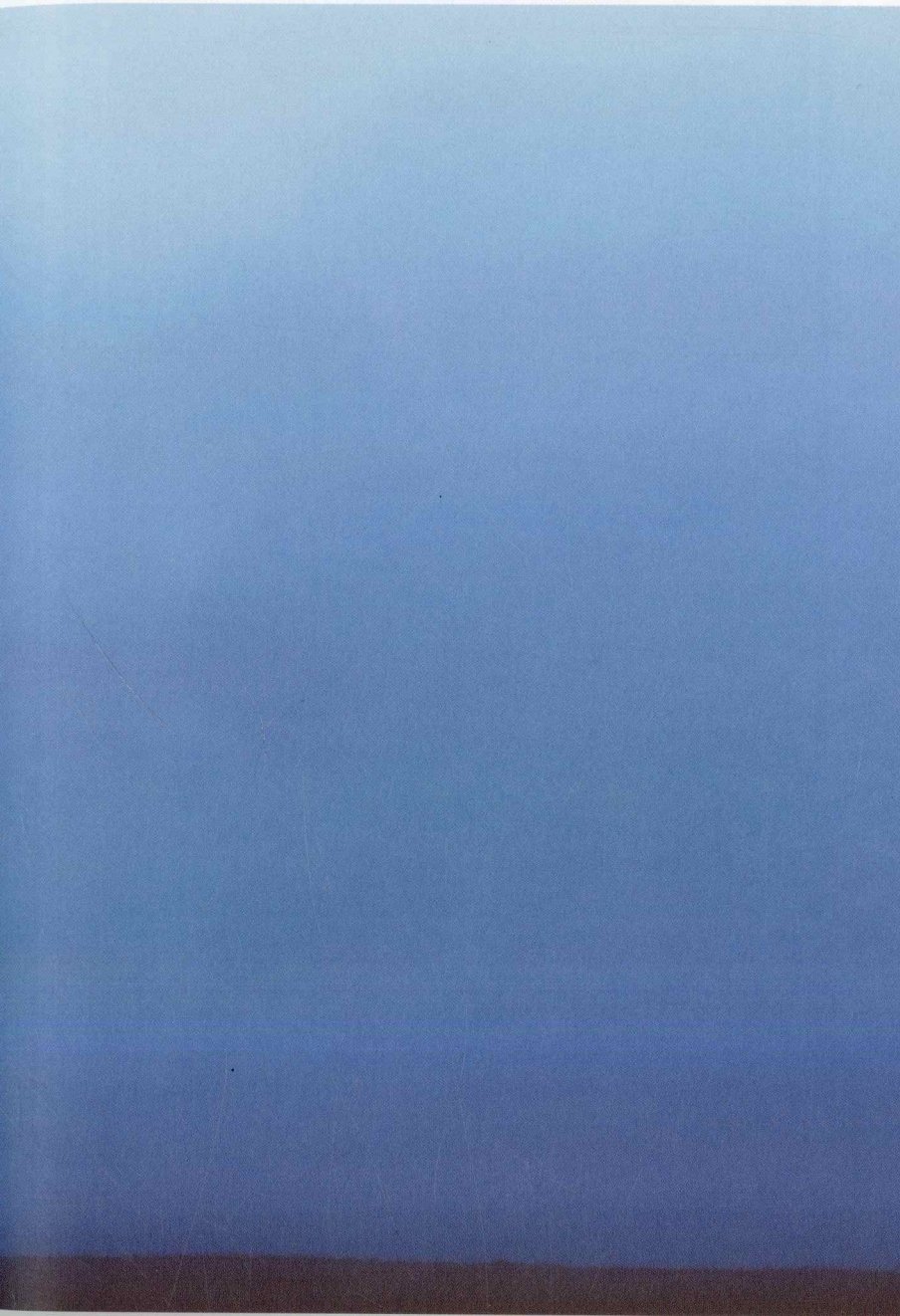
*Allegations Pile Up* but sometimes nothing comes of it

and all we're left saying is ***#Me Too, #Me Too, #Me Too***

# Untitled

**Jeremy Villar**





# Mortality

**Mallory Currie**

The waiting room is a place where no one likes to be. And yet there's the unspoken triumph that each of us have with guilty pleasure: It is not us under the knife. But we might as well be as we wait on pins and needles in uncomfortable wooden chairs with cheap padding that might have once been the ugly paisley print more fitting for Mimi's apartment but was now a dull brown. It didn't match the navy carpet at all. The carpet was divided into squares, easy to rip up to clean. The carpet also muffles all sound, dulling cries to whispers, frenzied dashes to cat tumbling. Every impatient pace became the Green Mile on a loved one's behalf. A slow funeral march. Like a soldier.

This waiting room was different in that it was only a perimeter. At the middle was a domed in greenhouse, hard to peer inside due to the condensation on the glass. The nicotine addicts braved the heat and stubbornly stood out there like ants under a magnifying glass, pulling with their lips, shortening their lives.

People are supposed to be listening for the call. There are TVs displaying secret numbers. Everyone's name is coded for their protection as if each of us here are for a rival spy company. No one here can be that important. No one pictures celebrities and presidents with their sternums deliberately cracked open. But I supposed, even the untouchables aren't immune to heart disease. Everyone dies.

# Annabel Lee

**Erica Lewis**

# City & Escapism

**Danielle Tetro**

Being in love had never— not even once— been on Emilia's to-do list. She didn't have time for love— the grandiose romantic gestures, the constant need for communication, the inevitable (and emotional) fights. Besides, none of it appealed to her. It never had. Since Emilia was a young girl, her only goal in life had been to be successful. From being the founder and leader of her university's Book Club to interning at Entity Magazine throughout the entirety of her last semester, she was lucky that she had time to get a few hours of sleep at night. She'd worked her ass off to get to where she was. Not everyone was capable of actually making a career out of blogging, but all Emilia had ever wanted to do was write— about anything and everything. And, lucky for her, people from all around the world seemed to be interested in what she had to say. Emilia had always had a knack for having her life together. It got to the point where not only her friends, but even her family and professors would approach her to ask how she did it. This is when she had the idea to create a public blog to document her techniques and suggestions, and thus, EfficienceWithEmilia.com was born. She wrote about everything from meal prepping to saving money to staying organized— all skills that she had managed to master throughout her 23 years of life through pure dedication, hard work, and an intense desire to always be on top of things.

This is why she was thrown completely off-kilter when she felt a strange tightness in her chest one evening, after a girl's night that may or may not have consisted of more than a few margaritas. The discomfort in her chest first arose when she was saying goodnight to Callie, one of the closest friends she had made since arriving in New York. Their taxi had dropped the pair off at Callie's apartment, a place that Emilia normally crashed at, especially after girl's night. After Emilia had pulled out all of the essentials for spending the night, which she simply left at the apartment since she was there so often, Callie had come downstairs to get some water, Advil, and to check on

Emilia before going to bed. Emilia was finally starting to feel semi-sober again when Callie came to sit next to her on the futon in the living room. Emilia watched as Callie approached her, still swaying slightly, her over-sized grey sweater hanging slightly off one shoulder. She admired her friend, beautiful and giggly as always, and felt the first inkling of an odd sensation within herself. She brushed it off, though, assuming that it was just the tequila still swimming through her body. Callie sat by Emilia's feet on the futon, cross-legged with her back leaning against the wall behind them, and turned to face her.

"Y'know what, Em? You're my best friend." Callie said, her words slurring a bit. Emilia chuckled. Callie was the only one who ever called her "Em." Emilia didn't usually like when people did that, but, for some reason, she didn't really mind when Callie said it.

"Well, yeah, Callie. And you're mine. You know this." Emilia said, her expression bemused at Callie stating such an obvious fact. Callie's eyes widened and she smiled, as if she wasn't already privy to this information.

"Cool, cool. Just checking. I just, I don't know, I'm really happy we have each other." Callie smiled softly before springing up suddenly, waving her hands about as she spoke excitedly— a trademark characteristic of hers. "And you work so hard and your blog is so fucking good. Like, I literally tell all of my customers about it when I have to do that bullshit barista small talk." She rolled her eyes as she finished her sentence.

"I appreciate that, Callie. I know you work hard too. I definitely wouldn't be functioning most days if it weren't for you hooking me up with a massive latte almost every morning." Emilia smiled, thinking of how getting her daily dose of caffeine from Callie was her favorite way to start the day. The sound of Callie's bubbly laughter filled the room of the small apartment before she reached for Emilia's hand, interlocking their fingers, the color of Callie's bright, seafoam green nail polish clashing

with that of Emilia's deep red.

"I'm happy to do it. Always." Callie lingered a bit before releasing Emilia's hand, which Emilia vaguely noticed felt much cooler without the warmth of Callie's touch, and stood up from the futon. "Alright, it's go-the-fuck-to-sleep o'clock. Sorry for getting mushy. You know how I get when I drink. G'night, Em." Callie hovered over Emilia, giving her a quick kiss on the forehead as per the routine they had developed when they slept over at each other's places, and headed toward the stairs.

"Oh, trust me, I know." Emilia said quietly, smiling to herself and watching Callie ascend up the stairs. She watched her disappear from sight before leaning back on the pillow Callie had given her from her bedroom, which smelled faintly of whichever new, fruity shampoo she had started using that week, and closed her eyes. When Emilia realized that she was still smiling, her eyes flew open as she jolted forward into an upright position, her chest feeling warm, yet constricted.

"Oh shit."

Emilia heard the shrill beeping of her phone alarm going off at precisely 8:30 AM, and promptly silenced it. Her anxiety had already woken her hours ago, an occurrence that she wasn't unfamiliar with. Usually, though, it was because she was running over the list of tasks she had to complete for the day—drafting a new blog post, meeting with the representatives of companies that she wanted to interview, responding to both business and personal emails. Today, however, it was because she realized that she had suffered long enough since that night at Callie's house, and she couldn't hold it in any longer. She had to tell her.

All of the research that Emilia had put into this was running through her mind. After countless nights of Googling phrases such as, "How do I know I'm in love?" to "How do I stop being in love with someone?" to "How do I erase any and all of my feelings entirely?", among others, she had finally recently sat down at her computer with a glass of wine in hand, took a deep breath, and searched, "How do I tell my best friend that I'm in love with them?" All of the articles and stories she had read ended with the same advice: communicate, tell them, be honest. None of it was what Emilia wanted to hear. And she had so many other questions that she couldn't find answers for, like

how do you tell them that you feel most content when you're doing nothing but sitting on the couch together, binge-watching another cheesy home makeover show? How do you tell them that they have literally never, ever felt this way about anyone, or even in general? And worst of all, what do you do if they're too weirded out by the whole situation and decide that they can't even be friends with you anymore?

That thought alone sent a wave of anxious nausea through Emilia's body. She didn't want to lose Callie, she meant everything to her. But, Emilia knew she couldn't keep pretending, not with how much she had been struggling. This emotion wasn't something that Emilia could control. She couldn't find a way to solve it, and that really bugged her. There was no system or technique she could think of to stop herself from feeling this way. And she was exhausted from trying to keep up the charade in front of Callie, who had asked her on more than one occasion if something was bothering her, to which Emilia could only say, "No, everything is fine. Just a little stressed." Callie had even asked her if she was pregnant at one point, when she noticed that she had cut back on drinking during one of their Sunday brunch mimosa sessions. Emilia had scoffed and stuttered before attempting to explain that she just wanted to take a bit of a break, for her own wellbeing, since she couldn't exactly tell her that she was actually worried that she would end up spilling her secret due to the truth-serum that was an alcoholic beverage.

Emilia shook her head at the thought of that day, and that question, in particular. Callie knew that Emilia was too busy for relationships, and that she had never even made the effort to obtain one. The thought of her assuming that she had actually hooked up with some random man was amusing, as the thought had never even crossed Emilia's mind. Emilia could barely sit through the various romantic comedies that Callie made her watch every now and then. Callie would squeal in delight at the romantic gestures of the protagonist, and subtly try to wipe away her tears at the predictably cliche happy ending. Emilia would glance over at Callie and smile to herself about what a hopeless romantic she was. Emilia also knew, however, that Callie hadn't been in a relationship in quite some time. Her last boyfriend was her college sweetheart who she had known since high school, and was actually the entire reason she ended

up in New York in the first place. As per her romantic nature, Callie had agreed to follow Reese (a name that had been burned into her brain from the amount of times Callie brought him up, especially when the heartbreak was still fresh) to White Plains to be with him while he worked as a business consultant. It was only about a few months later, though, that Reese had sat her down to tell her that the spark they had just wasn't there anymore, at least not for him, and that he wanted to explore his options now that he was in a new place with new opportunities. Callie had been devastated. She felt like everything she had ever known, felt, or thought about the man that she loved, and about love in general, was suddenly wrong and meaningless. To make matters worse, Callie was the one being forced to find a new place to live. It was around this time that Callie spent most nights at Emilia's apartment, so that she didn't have to be around Reese while she was searching for a new job and a place to live. Emilia couldn't even count the amount of nights she spent consoling Callie during that time. She hated seeing her like that. An anger bubbled in her chest every time Callie questioned why she wasn't good enough for Reese, and how he could simply change his mind like that after everything they had been through together. She hardly brought him up anymore, and Callie still fantasized about the idea of true love and anything of it's nature, but Emilia knew that Callie had been burned pretty badly by the experience, and was pretty hesitant to give relationships another chance.

Emilia was lost in thought for a while before checking her phone again, seeing that it was almost 9 AM now. She had a pretty flexible schedule since blogging allowed her to work from home, but she knew she needed to get going, especially if she was going to catch Callie on her break to finally make her confession. She got up and began her morning routine (not without making her bed first, of course), and tried to swallow down the nervousness she felt inside. The various scenarios of Callie's reaction flooded her mind, and she tried to prepare for each and every one of them. Emilia had written and revised the script of what she wanted to say in her head over a thousand times, and even a few times on paper, before deciding that she just needed to be logical and straightforward about this. And, no matter what happened, at least the weight of her feelings would be off

her shoulders. She had no control over how Callie would react, but Emilia had trained herself to work through any and every unpredictable situation. And if it meant compartmentalizing the rejection and throwing herself even further into her work to deal with the pain, then so be it. She certainly had enough to keep her distracted. Still, she didn't like thinking about her life without Callie.. No more inside jokes, ranting sessions, lunch dates, or words of encouragement when either needed them. But, it was a risk she was going to have to take.

After picking out a casual, yet stylish black jumpsuit, one of her go-to outfits, placing her sleek, dark hair in one of her traditional up-dos, and applying her signature deep cherry red lipstick, she did her last looks in the mirror before pushing up her black framed glasses onto the bridge of her nose and heading to the elevator of her apartment building. When Emilia finally stepped outside, it was a particularly clear and sunny day. She followed her usual routine of working from her phone while attempting to hail a cab, and was able to get one quicker than usual.

Maybe this is a sign of good luck, Emilia thought to herself, still buzzing with nervous energy.

The ride to Gregory's Coffee was stop and go due to the usual asinine amount of traffic, and Emilia couldn't decide if she was grateful that she was getting to put this off or if she was annoyed that she couldn't go ahead and get it over with. Emilia scrolled through her texts, and began to re-read her conversation with Callie, searching for any clue within the blue bubbles indicating that she already knew what it was she wanted to talk about. She had already asked Callie if they could talk during her break, to which she had enthusiastically agreed. Emilia continued to analyze and think of the right words to say when they were face to face until the taxi abruptly stopped near her destination. She handed over the money and was thankful that her driver hadn't tried to make conversation with her, or if he had, she hadn't processed any of it.

Emilia stepped out carefully onto the crowded sidewalk, and looked up at the familiar white and green letters decorating the exterior of the building. She tried to pull herself together amidst the usual commotion of the city sidewalk, and counted to ten before heading inside.

The place was packed as usual, filled to the brim with people making phone calls, placing orders, and admiring the assortment of baked goods out on display. Emilia scanned the area for a petite young woman wearing a black apron, with a strawberry blonde ponytail poking out of the back of a matching black cap. After a few seconds of searching with no luck, she saw a figure pop up from behind the dark wooden counter. Before Emilia could even call out for her attention, Callie made direct eye contact with her and waved furiously.

"Em! Hey! I'll be right over!" Callie said. Emilia just gave a small smile and nodded in response.

She leaned up against the wall by the entrance door and watched Callie pull off her cap and apron before ducking back down, presumably to store them somewhere behind the counter. Callie stood up once more before navigating her way through waves of other baristas busying themselves with steaming milk and creating latte art with various intricate designs. Emilia was scanning her surroundings for a less crowded area. She realized this probably wasn't the best place to do this, but it was going to be another hectic week for both herself and Callie, and she knew that she would psych herself out if she waited any longer. Her thoughts were interrupted by Callie suddenly appearing in front of her.

I guess this is it, she thought, feeling her heartbeat pick up in speed. She looked past Callie and noticed that a corner table was free and had the least amount of patrons surrounding it.

"You wanted to talk?" Callie said, tilting her head to the side a bit, causing Emilia's heart to tighten uncomfortably in her chest.

"Yeah, yeah. Here, let's go over to this table." Emilia gestured to the spot, and Callie nodded in agreement before tailing behind.

Emilia felt the room moving in slow motion despite the hustle and bustle. Her fight-or-flight response was in full effect, but her feet continued moving toward the table. She slid into the stool against the window as Callie took the one opposite of her. Emilia could feel a lump in her throat that she attempted to clear, the words she had spent the last year keeping bottled up were about to come rushing out. She managed to take one deep

inhale, but just as she started to exhale and begin the expulsion of her feelings, Callie spoke.

"Hey, Em, just really quickly," she began, "there's something I actually want to talk to you about too." Emilia raised her eyebrows in confusion, the previously rampant thoughts in her mind now completely still. "I mean, you know me better than anyone, so, obviously your thoughts and feelings matter most to me." Callie said, as she rested her pair of folded hands on the table, nervously twiddling her thumbs. Emilia could only stare at her best friend, completely lost. What was happening here? Emilia thought to herself that there was no way that Callie could be addressing Emilia's feelings before even she could, although that would make perfect sense. Callie always seemed to know what Emilia was feeling before she did. Why would this be any different? She forced herself to speak.

"Okay, Callie.. Same to you. What's going on?" Emilia asked, completely unsure of where this was going. Before Callie could speak once more, the phone she had placed on the table began to buzz. Both women stared at it, and Emilia registered that a photo of a seemingly attractive young man, though it was hard to tell from upside down, appeared as the form of caller ID. Callie looked up at Emilia with a sly smile before answering.

"Hello? Hey, yes! We're in the corner!" Callie turned around in her seat to wave at a figure that Emilia couldn't make out near the entrance. Emilia waited, unable to process what exactly was happening. Before she could blink, though, a slender and, now that she could actually see what he looked like, definitely attractive young man came into view. Emilia glanced at Callie, noticing a certain sparkle in her olive-green eyes as she watched the man approach. Emilia suddenly felt sick to her stomach, but before she could make an escape, the man was at their table and standing beside Callie. The two looked at each other in a sickeningly sweet way before directing their glances to Emilia.

"Em, this is Noah. We met during one of my shifts a few weeks ago." Callie said before putting her arm around his lower back and pulling him closer. Emilia watched the pair with what she assumed was a less-than-pleased expression, as she saw both of their smiles falter and their eyes flicker with confusion and concern. "We've kind of been, y'know, dating." Callie

stated, sounding unsure of herself while examining Emilia's face for clues as to what was going on inside her head. Emilia knew though that, for once, her face was unreadable to Callie. She was staring past the couple at this point, disassociating to the point of not being able to hear any of the noise around her. She was briefly pulled out of her daze when she heard an unfamiliar voice saying her name.

"Emilia, right? I've heard so much about you. It's so nice to finally meet you." Noah said, speaking relatively slowly and with a hint of worry at Callie's seemingly catatonic friend. As his words rang in her ears, Emilia noticed that this young, attractive man actually had the audacity to have an Australian accent, on top of everything else. This was too much. Emilia stumbled getting up from her stool, both Callie and Noah reaching out as if they could steady her in some way.

"Yeah, nice, sure.. good to meet you," Emilia mumbled. "Uh, I, sorry. I have to go. Sorry." Emilia took once last glimpse at Callie, seeing her forehead scrunched up, a clear sign that she didn't understand what was happening. "Sorry, Callie.. I'll talk to you later." Emilia said, her words still muffled and her mouth feeling particularly dry. She looked at the man beside her, and nodded once in his direction. "Noah."

Before either of them could say anything else, she forced her numbed legs to walk toward the front door and out onto the crowded street once more. She was hit with a slight breeze and the brightness shining from the sun in the clear sky. Emilia knew she had to go somewhere, anywhere but here, but she couldn't focus for long enough to wait for another taxi. Instead, she looked to her left, and set off, crossing at the next block she needed to head in the direction of Madison Square Park. She was functioning on autopilot as she navigated through the mass of people rushing around her. When she finally arrived at the entrance to the lawn, she searched for a bench and headed to the first empty one that she could find. She wasn't entirely sure how, but she felt that the worn, wooden bench mimicked how she was feeling in that moment. She sat down in the center, took a moment to breathe, and proceeded to slump over and place her face in her hands.

She knew she couldn't cry. Not here. Besides, crying wasn't really her thing. She always did everything in her pow-

er to prevent it from happening. She knew that she should be happy for Callie, and she didn't even know if she would have reacted positively to what Emilia had to say. Emilia looked up at the sky, and then around at all the people lounging about in the park - children playing with their friends, couples walking hand in hand, people headed toward the dog park with their furry companions happily wagging their tails. She realized suddenly that this was the first time she had been to the park in months. She hadn't taken the time to really slow down and just observe her surroundings in a peaceful setting in a long time. Emilia also soon realized that she felt a vibration coming from her jumpsuit pocket. She pulled her phone out and looked at the lock-screen, filled completely with notifications of missed calls and texts - all from Callie. Emilia was hit with a pang of guilt at running out on her best friend with no explanation. She knew Callie would be worried sick about her and completely confused as to why she had run off. Emilia closed her eyes and inhaled before tapping on one of the missed call notifications. She held the phone to her ear for less than ten seconds before she heard the familiar, frantic voice on the other end.

"Em? What the hell? Are you okay? What happened? Where did you go?" Callie continued to speak rapidly. "I was scared you weren't going to like Noah and I'm sorry I didn't tell you earlier, I just wanted to take the time to figure out what I was doing because I know that you know my history with these things and I value your opinion so much and I just-"

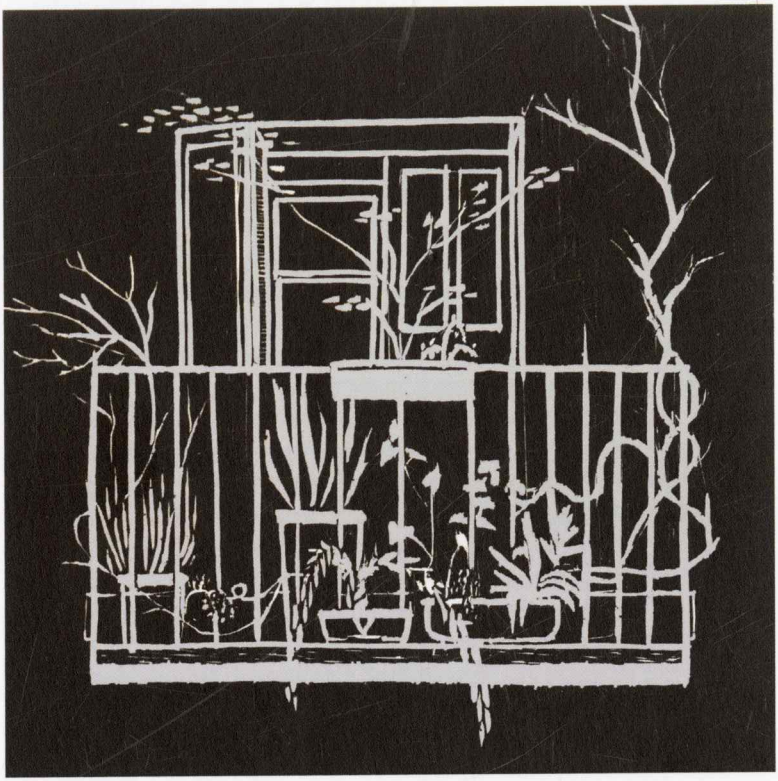
"Callie." Emilia said, firmly. The other line went silent. Emilia continued, "I'm sorry. Listen. Can you do me a favor?"

"Of course, Em. Anything." Callie said, her kindness and loyalty sending a warm sensation through Emilia's body, despite the ache in her heart.

"Can you come meet me at Madison Square Park? I really need to talk to you."

# Spanish Balcony

Olivia Gonzalez



# Two Letters From the Year of the Rooster

**Ovi Donnelly**

Dear Scott,

Most of what you recommended to me led me to something profound. I watched 2001: A Space Odyssey many months after the memorial service where your friends sang a song I knew none of the words to and still cannot recall the rhythm of. After the movie ended, I sat on the floor of my living room for nearly an hour monologuing to no one in particular about the many possible wonders of space. I didn't think of your death when watching the movie, which seems odd now. The story that was birthed from my monologuing centers on the reality of distant but definite death, and the assimilation of creatures to one another's thought patterns. Like the socialization of wolves. The domestication of children. Sometimes I think about us as celestial bodies. I wonder if you burned too brightly to remain. If your ashes are the dust of a nebula waiting to become.

You sat in a car once, watching the stoplights out the passenger window while one of your friends kept his foot steady on the brake in a Portland, Oregon freeway lane. "You know, the problem with your religion is that your gods have too many arms and not enough good ideas," you said to him, and waited for his responding laugh.

The problem with humanity is that we have too many things and rarely the willingness to understand each other. The problem with humanity is that someone like you can die at 42 and my dad's mother can look at me after the memorial service and tell me I look very good in my suit. I shouldn't. I should look like nothing. There shouldn't be clouds of cigarette smoke surrounding me as Dad talks hollowly about his worn-out socks, his pen-stained shirt. Neither of us should be anywhere without you a phone call away at most. The problem with humanity is that even after one of your relatives tells us you spoke very

highly of the both of us, Dad still says in the car that he was terrified people would blame him for not making sure you were okay that night.

Sometimes when I watch movies where fathers are away from their children for extended periods of time, my thoughts pass over you. It happened when I watched Interstellar. It's a strange thing. You weren't my father, but I do remember Dad saying without a single hint of mirth in his tone that he would uproot his entire life to move to Austin, Texas with you. I made enough jokes about you eventually becoming another father figure to me that when any of my friends find out you died they always get that blank look of shared but lesser grief.

When I listen to songs meant to evoke feelings of loss, I remember the way Dad's arm tightened around my shoulders in the pews when my breathing turned to gasps. I hadn't considered that I would probably cry. I hadn't cried at all, up to that point. It wasn't real before I saw your picture outside the church doors, saw the room full of 50 or more people all there to solidify the absence of someone as vital as Scott Bryant. But even when I hear those songs, I can't cry the way I probably need to. I cried when listening to your music, felt my throat burn as the backing track hurtled your voice into the bedroom from my phone's little speaker. I see the email Dad sent with the attached audio files, pinned at the top of my inbox whenever I check it. It sends a twinge of bitter pain through me, some sort of subdued rage.

Most of what you recommended to me led me to something profound, but I'll admit that I couldn't listen to all twenty minutes of The Friendly Man, narrated by Scott Carrier. Maybe because I was exhausted, because all I could think about was the thirty minutes I spent typing up a transcript of every text message we ever exchanged so I wouldn't lose them, because sometimes I think about Alabaster City Fest or Orr Park and I feel so fucking empty it makes me want to walk around your silent neighborhood late at night and just focus on the thudding of my shoes against the pavement.

It only makes me sadder to know you can't wander off of hiking trails anymore.

Dear Scott,

I started thinking about that little Quaker house on Montclair that we all went to for a while. Sometimes I want to pick through all the conversations we never had. We spent so much time bracketed by silence, like that hour on Sunday mornings, or when we were slightly too far apart on the hiking trail by the high school to hold a conversation.

Someone the other day brought up the difference between a funeral and a memorial service, and I found myself grateful you had been cremated. Dead bodies never look like the people they used to be. You would be too quiet with your eyes shut in that faux-peaceful, preserved way. Your body dressed in clothes nicer than anything I've ever seen you wear. I'm glad all my memories of you are of your living body in motion, shredded cargo pants and t-shirts with holes in the armpits, your eyes smiling, your mouth moving. I could never look at you the way Amy looked in her casket and her light blue dress when I was six, the way my uncle looked the moment of the flatline, his skin yellowing and his last tears crystallized in the corner of his eyes. You would have looked like a stranger, walled in and yet still, somehow empty.

But this is more morbid than I usually like to get with these letters. It was just the topic of silence. I remember wishing nobody would talk to me after your service. Especially not Dad's parents. They told me my suit looked good. I've talked about that before. It just seemed so arbitrary, so trivial. I shouldn't have existed physically for any sort of judgement that day. My suit wasn't the point. We were on the porch of a funeral home in the heat while everyone smoked their cigarettes and wiped their faces. It wasn't a fashion runway. I wanted to pull out all my teeth and glue my mouth shut so I wouldn't have to respond. Sometimes I still slip into those silences. It feels easier than confronting the anxiety that swells inside my rib cage and threatens to make me jump onto the nearest tall surface and scream until my throat bleeds.

Maybe it's just that nothing has ever felt quite as peaceful as that hour of silence in a creaky little house on Montclair on Sundays. I might always be mimicking those moments, trying to find my way back to them. To you and Dad meditating over

something bigger than just ourselves. Or maybe you weren't thinking about anything profound. Maybe you were thinking about the pattern of the rug, like I was, the way it was composed of ever-smaller circles of fabric curling into themselves. And maybe that was profound in itself, or maybe it was just the rug whose corners we stepped on when we left. Maybe it was just a thing I haven't seen for years, the way your face is starting to fade out of my mind. I have to look at the blurry pictures I snuck of you when you weren't looking, the ones where you and Dad were mid-conversation and your eyes were bright and he looked happy for the first time since his relapse. I liked those pictures of you. Where neither of you were posing. No facades. No intricacies. Just the shadows of your face compounded by too many unremarkable light sources.

# Nature of the Flame

Sierra Bobo

# American Homemade Tasty Recipe

**Erin Green**

Ingredients:

- Medium Metal Bowl
- Police Baton
- 12 oz. of chocolate insecurity
- 1 cup of skin bleaching crème
- 3 white eggs
- 3 cups of bleached flour
- Libertarianism
- Prison or Oven
- Brown paper bag
- Vanilla frosting
- 1 single chocolate chip

*use food stamps to pay for ingredients; better result if a welfare queen uses recipe

Instructions:

1. Sift one bag of chocolate insecurity into a medium metal bowl. Pour only a cup of skin bleaching crème into the bowl.

2. Blend the dough with a police baton that is usually used to stop minorities in the street. If the mixture is not obeying, you may need to use unnecessary force.

3. While mixing, make sure that you are listening to the latest libertarian podcast, or the dough will not rise. Next, add 3 cups of bleached flour.

4. Crack three white eggs into the bowl. This recipe calls for the brand known as "Cultural Appropriation."

5. Again, use the police baton to mix (or beat) the dough until it is well mixed, but do not over mix, or it will cause political correctness. Add an extra cup of bleached flour if political correctness starts to bubble in dough.

6. Preheat the oven to approximately 400°, and leave the cake in the oven for 20 plus years, or for life.

7. Take the cake out of the oven right before it starts to brown at the edges. Don't let it get too brown, or it will be shot.

8. Use the paper bag test to check the color of the cake. If the cake is darker than the paper bag, it is too ugly to be served.

9. This recipe calls for white icing only. Using other colors will result in an inferior cake design. Vanilla is always better.

10. Finally, sprinkle a single chocolate chip on top of the cake and call it diversity or equality, but realize that the inside of the cake, the chocolate, is the best part.

# Vulnerable

**Jim Vick**

Jackson really didn't feel like hanging out tonight, but when he got Caleb's text asking him if he wanted to come over, he took one look at his calculus homework and decided that goofing around with his friends in someone's backyard was a much more pleasurable experience than taking a metric ton of derivatives. Plus, it was Caleb, which meant that he probably invited the rest of the guys over to do something stupid and/or borderline illegal, and somebody had to be the friend that tries to convince them not to do the stupid thing but is ultimately ignored. Jackson was usually that friend.

Night had already fallen by the time Jackson arrived. He could see the smoke billowing from the enormous burn pile in the backyard, even from the driveway. That smoke belonged to a roaring bonfire that looked like it was straining to cover all of the sticks, branches, and leaves that stacked upon one another like an all-natural Jenga tower. The leaping fire almost looked like a short kid trying to touch the top of a doorframe.

Jackson met Caleb in the backyard. "Dude!" Jackson exclaimed as he walked across the carport. "When did your dad give you permission to burn your brush pile?"

The smile in Caleb's eyes told him that he hadn't, but Caleb felt the need to say anyway, "Well, there is a slight possibility that he might not know." His smile was full of a mischievous charm that drove girls crazy. "Besides, we're about to graduate! I figured we might as well burn that sucker before you went off to college!" Already Caleb had perfected the artificial cheer that seemed to cover every event pertaining to graduation.

"Hey, we technically still have a semester left," Jackson corrected as a way to deflect the conversation away from the subject of his eventual departure. He wasn't necessarily sure why he decided to attend college out of state while the rest of his friends stayed relatively local. The scholarships were just as good here, and he wouldn't have to pay out of state tuition if he stayed home. However, Jackson felt an unexplainable desire

to venture beyond his comfort zone, to break the routine and predictability in his day to day life. Jackson was not the kind of person to take risks, but he couldn't escape the feeling that his life was stagnating. In truth, he really wanted to see what a change of scenery would do to his development as a person. He hated to disappoint his friends, but he just wasn't sure he could explain all of that to them.

"Who all's coming tonight?" Jackson asked, hoping to further steer the conversation away from his future. Several voices from behind him answered that question.

"Oh man! Now that's a bonfire!" announced their mutual friend Ryan. If Caleb was the dominating personality of the group, Ryan was the supporting hype man. A nice guy by all accounts, most of Ryan's vocabulary consisted of words and phrases like, "That's awesome!" or, "Yeah, totally!" or, "Oh, that sucks, bro." While this made him a fun guy to be around, it did not really make him a good voice of reason, especially when the group decided to do something stupid.

Caleb was the type of guy who fed off that enthusiasm well. "Yeah man! Took me most of the kerosene from the shed, but I got it goin'!" Caleb's voice beamed with the pride of a person who reserved his pride for activities like this.

"Ya got any left?" Ryan's smile beamed almost brighter than the bonfire. Jackson didn't like where this was going.

Caleb rushed over to the carport and produced two full bottles of kerosene. "I like the way you think, Ryan," he said, handing him the keys to a fun but recklessly dangerous time.

"Guys, what are we doing?" Jackson's voice took the tone of one who spoke with authority that regularly got ignored. "Let's think this through. We're handling flammable materials here –"

Caleb and Ryan were already heading out to the fire, challenging each other to a contest to see how far away they could spray the kerosene and hit the fire. It hopped and skipped erratically with every splash of kerosene like a child learning

how to play hopscotch.

"What idiots," Jackson said to himself.

"What have they done now?" came the reedy voice of Caleb's cousin Morton. Morton and Caleb could not have been more opposite. While Caleb was popular and influential amongst his peers, Morton was more awkward and tended to avoid attention. Despite his poor fashion sense dependent entirely upon his collection of bow ties, Morton had a way of being himself, even if that meant being considered strange. Fortunately for him Caleb was the type of guy who could hang out with anyone, even his own oddball cousin.

"Kerosene spraying contest," Jackson said, deciding to leave the details to Morton's imagination.

Caleb and Ryan came back to the carport after they ran out of kerosene, jokingly arguing with each other about who won. "I totally got it into the bonfire at five feet," Ryan said.

"You're a liar," responded Caleb, raising his eyebrow suggestively. "Of course, girls at school tell me you lie about your length all the time."

"That's not what your mom said last night!"

"What's this about Caleb's mom?" came the relaxed voice of their friend Mike. Despite only moving to the neighborhood last year, Mike fit in well with the rest of the guys. A laid-back type B guy, Mike was incredibly good at feeling the vibe of wherever he was, always able to go with the flow.

"Caleb was implying that Ryan had a small— " Jackson hit Morton on the arm before he could continue. Sometimes Morton was a little slow on the uptake.

"Well everyone knows that," Mike said nonchalantly. Ryan laughed along with everyone else, even though he did look noticeably embarrassed.

All the guys continued greeting each other in the carport for several minutes. The general chatter of the moment was positive and energetic, but Jackson didn't participate too much in it. He was feeling tired and he was still hung up on his college selection and how it would affect everyone. It was a thought that never seemed to leave him these days, keeping him up at night, always occupying his mind.

"Is this everyone?" asked Mike, interrupting Jackson's thoughts.

"No, there should be one more –"

A large white truck pulled into the driveway, finishing Caleb's sentence for him. An even larger guy wearing a letterman jacket stepped down from the truck and started walking toward the carport.

It was Darren, a good friend of the group's who hadn't been hanging with them too often lately. A lineman on the school football team, Darren usually spent most of his time either practicing, exercising, or working on his truck. Despite his enormous size, he was actually one of the nicest guys at school, who usually didn't say too much and tried to get along with everyone.

"Hey Darren!" came the raucous cheers from the guys, who all were doing a relatively poor job of hiding their surprise.

Darren gave a nonchalant smile in response. "Hey everybody," he said in his low, but gentle voice. It was voice that commanded respect even if it didn't intend to. It had a soft firmness behind it, like that of a kindly father figure. He eyed the bonfire approvingly. "This is impressive."

"Yea man!" Caleb responded enthusiastically. "Spent two hours gettin' that sucker heated up." Murmurs of admiration and respect rose from the guys. There was a cool silence as they all stared to admire the fire some more.

"Alright, well, let's get this party started!" said Caleb. He gestured around the carport to the coolers filled with beer and the tables spread with chips, dips, hot dogs, and s'mores ingredients. Everybody shuffled around to get what they wanted and headed over to the bonfire, where there were several chairs assembled.

Jackson kept mostly silent while he gathered his food, his mind preoccupied with his worries. As he was gathering his chips on his annoyingly flimsy paper plate, he saw Darren out of the corner of his eye coming up to the table to get some food.

"Haven't seen you in a while, man," Jackson said, trying to remain relatively nonchalant.

"Yeah, man. Been busy." Darren's response was curt and almost too quick. His body movements mirrored Jackson's in that they were more preoccupied with mental worries than the task at hand. Jackson even thought he heard a slight break in his voice but decided to ignore it.

"I hear ya there," Jackson said with an inflection in his voice that seemed to indicate that he was going to say something more, but Jackson decided to just leave it at that and walk to the fire.

After much food and beer were consumed, it didn't take long for somebody to have a bad idea. "I'm telling you," Caleb said with drunken sincerity, "I'm the best shot outta all you morons here."

"No, you're not," Ryan said with equal amounts of drunkenness and sincerity. "When we went shootin' last week you were so bad I coulda held the skeet directly in front of you and you'd still miss."

"You would stand directly in front of a shotgun with a skeet, you big idiot," Caleb laughed loudly as he spoke.

"Well let's settle this like adults, then," said Mike, who did the little half-smile he liked to do when he was about to say something devious. He stood up, walked over to the porch on the side of the house, and stuck his beer can on the railing. "Whoever hits this can from the furthest away is the best shot here."

This idea was met with much enthusiasm by Caleb and Ryan. Jackson was less convinced. "Guys, you've all been drinking too much to be playing with guns," he said worriedly. "And also, you're aimin' at the house. You're definitely gonna hit something if not someone."

He wasn't really able to convince them to not partake in the contest, but he at least was able to get them to shoot at a branch in the nearby woods, which would lower the chance of them hitting anything important.

Caleb, Ryan, and Mike each took turns shooting at the branch, while Morton watched the branch from the porch to judge who actually hit it or not. Each gunshot was followed by laughter and insults until eventually everyone realized that even attempting to shoot a flimsy branch with a firearm can get boring after a while, and they went back to the fire.

Jackson didn't participate in the contest or the revelry that accompanied it. He was really in no mood to do anything except make sure no one got killed and complain about his school workload. No matter how hard he tried though, he just couldn't shake his personal fears. In six months, I'll never see

these guys again, he thought. I don't want to leave all of this behind, but what will I do if I don't?

Jackson looked at Darren. He wasn't speaking much either. That was relatively common for him, the quiet gentle giant that he was. What was unusual was his eyes. They seemed filled with pain, a pain that looked like it was really hurting him. For some reason this scared Jackson, and he looked away from Darren to look at a random stick poking out from the bonfire. What's up with him? he wondered.

Eventually, another round of raucous laughter had died down and was replaced with a fiery silence. The fire was starting to die down some, looking more like a lounging cat pawing at something in front of its face. The silence continued for some time until Caleb spoke up.

"Well I don't know about you boys," he said with a grin, "But I feel content." He leaned back in his chair. "Everything just seems to feel...right with the world, if that makes sense." It almost seemed factual when Caleb said it.

The general murmurs that followed seemed to affirm what Caleb was saying, with Ryan adding a supplementary "Yeah, man, yeah."

"What do you mean by that?" Darren asked rather suddenly, albeit still quietly.

There was an awkward stiffness that seemed to infect everyone. Caleb hesitated before responding. "I just mean that I feel good, you know?" Caleb sounded incredibly nervous, like a child who unwittingly said something their parents disapproved of. "No need to overanalyze it, dude. Chill."

"It's just that everyone says that they feel good, or fine, or whatever, but I mean, do we really know what that's like?" Darren's voice seemed to raise in pitch and get faster with every successive word. "Because every morning we get up and we go to school and we go to work and we say we're ok and that nothing's wrong with us but that can't be true all the time, right? What happens when we start doing bad? What do we say then?"

Darren's eyes were staring through the bonfire with an intensity fiercer than anyone else had ever seen. Fear seemed to grip and control him like a puppet, making him do or say whatever it wanted, with Darren losing more and more control.

Caleb spoke again. "Hey man, I think you've had a bit too

much to drink. You're kinda just rambling right now. You'll be alright." He didn't sound convinced.

Nobody really knew what to say until Mike spoke up. "Are you saying you're not doing good, man?"

Darren didn't seem to hear him. He kept staring through the bonfire. It was much lower now and the ash piling around it seemed to serve as a border protecting them from the impending coldness within it.

"I'm saying that I haven't been doing good for a long time."

Everyone was shocked and bewildered by what Darren was saying. Jackson couldn't believe it. Darren always seemed like he was doing ok. At least he thought he did. Did he really know Darren?

Darren's head hung low as he continued. "Do you guys remember Melissa?"

The flames were barely active now, the fire being low enough to where it could safely be stepped over. "Yeah, man, I remember her," said Ryan. "You guys broke up when she moved last year, right?"

Darren's hands started to shake. "That's not the whole story."

Jackson wasn't sure what Darren was trying to say, but the way his voice no longer sounded bold and reassuring scared him. It started to crack and warble the more he spoke.

"We weren't planning on breaking up at all." Darren's eyes started to liquidate with tears of heartbreak. "We had both picked out a college we wanted, and we wanted to see if we could make things work between us." He sniffed back more tears as he kept talking. "The only problem was..." Darren let out an ugly-sounding cough. "The only problem was I...I got her pregnant."

The flames had mostly died down by this point, as only a few small branches remained lit.

"I don't even know what she did with the baby," Darren spoke with the voice of a scared child. "She just moved away, and her parents said that I could never see her again and I never found out if that's what she wanted and I just...I just want to hold her close again and tell her that it's going to be ok." He wiped some tears away from his eyes. "I just want to know what

happened to our baby. I'm so scared."

None of the other guys seemed to know what to do as Darren to continue to cry to the dying fire in front of him. Caleb was uncharacteristically silent as he took turns staring at Darren and the ashes, the look on his face conveying that his thoughts a million miles away from him. Ryan kept looking at Caleb for guidance and then at Darren out of deep concern. Mike stared absentmindedly in front of him, looking completely lost.

Jackson's eyes darted between all of his friends as his worries kept mounting. Darren was clearly not alright, but what were they going to do about it? What could they say? What were they supposed to say? None of the guys seemed to know what to do as their vacant stares all seemed to communicate the same bewilderment that Jackson was feeling.

All except for Morton. Tears brimming in his eyes, he stood up, walked over to Darren and placed an awkward hand on his shoulder. He blinked a couple times and tried to clear his throat before he spoke.

"Darren, my dad didn't enter my life until I was 13." The tears were flowing freely down Morton's face now as he continued speaking. "My mom got pregnant coming out of high school and my father was a burgeoning alcoholic, so her parents didn't want anything to do with him, either." Morton's face seemed to contain all of those painful memories; his eyes were dark, his brow was furrowed, and his overall visage was grim and serious. "But he cleaned himself up, and he moved in with us. I was so happy to get to know my dad after that. He really was a kind and caring man." Morton cleared his throat one more time. "I guess what I'm trying to say here is: don't lose hope. There's always a chance that you can come back into their lives."

Morton remained standing by Darren's side as Darren continued to cry, pausing momentarily to wipe his nose on his sleeve. Caleb looked at Morton with surprise. "That's not what my dad told me."

Morton half-turned to look at Caleb. "From what I can tell, your dad's not the type who would discuss family drama like that."

The sounds of Darren and Morton crying were the only sounds being made for several minutes until Mike spoke up.

"I miss my dad," he said with an uncharacteristic sorrow. "He would've been 45 today."

Ryan turned to look at Mike. "Your dad's dead?" he asked, his surprised tone speaking for everyone.

Mike didn't look up. "Yeah, that's the reason we moved here," he said. "We wanted to get away from all of the...painful memories, I guess." Mike tried to blink back some of his tears but was unable to do so. "The memories just seem to follow us."

There was another silence before Ryan spoke. "I wish Angie and I had never broken up," he said. "I still loved her."

Caleb's stare remained on what was left of the fire as he spoke. "I don't think I want to be an engineer," he said quietly. "I just know that it's what my dad wants, and after Mom left, I don't want to hurt him any more than he is already." Caleb coughed loudly, seemingly trying to cover up how uneven his voice sounded.

Jackson looked at every single one of his friends and knew he had to say something. He wanted to comfort them all, he wanted to tell them that it was all going to be ok, that they just had to keep their chins up and they would be alright. He wanted to tell them that he was really terrified of going away to school and that he wasn't sure it was the right decision and that he was afraid that they would go to their own schools thinking that he had abandoned them. But he didn't know if it all was going to be ok and he didn't know how to tell them he was afraid. He knew, though, that he had to say something.

"I'm going to miss all you guys," was all he could say.

As the fire finally died out, leaving only ash and a few warm embers, the following moments seemed to pass incredibly quickly. Jackson wasn't really sure when, but eventually, Caleb's parents came home, and one by one, each guy got up and left without even saying goodbye. After a while, the only ones left by the dead fire were Jackson and Darren, Jackson frozen to his seat with the feeling that he needed to comfort Darren, who had stopped crying and was now just staring vacantly at the ashes. Jackson wasn't sure what to tell him, but he knew he had to say something to him. He got up and walked over to him and started to try to tell him to hang in there, or something stupidly corny like that, but he stopped, afraid that he would come off insin-

cere. Instead he walked back to his car and drove home.

Jackson had trouble sleeping that night, worrying about Darren and his friends and his future. He tried not to blame himself too much. What could he have said? It's not like he and his friends had ever been that honest and open with each other before. Why weren't they? Was it pride? Was it the fear of looking weak? Was it the uncomfortable amount of closeness that that would entail? Jackson didn't know.

He thought about all the times he passed by Darren in the hallways at school and how he never said anything to him, all the while his friend was suffering in silence. Did he ever look like he was in pain? Jackson wondered. How many times had he seen him and thought that Darren was doing just fine?

After a few hours of fitful sleep, Jackson woke up. He knew that he couldn't let one of his closest friends feel alone. Whether or not he could have seen the signs of Darren's suffering, he knew that now more than ever he needed someone to let him know that he was going to be ok. He grabbed his phone off his bedside table and texted Darren:

Hey man, I'm sorry I couldn't tell you this at the bonfire, but what you're going through is hard and painful. I don't have all the answers and I sure don't know what to tell you to make you feel better, but I just want to say that I believe you're going to be ok. It was very brave of you to tell us all this. I know that sometimes it's hard to be vulnerable. Especially to other guys. I know that I'm terrified of going off to college because it's a whole other world filled with uncertainty. But my parents always tell me that the uncertain times in life are there so that we can appreciate the times when we feel the most assured. I think that someday you're going to get to see Melissa again, and maybe even find out that she had the baby. I think that if that's the case, you're going to be a great father. Don't ever give up hope.

Jackson felt a strange sense of calm after he sent the text. Talking about his college worries had lifted a huge weight off his shoulders. He sighed as he looked out the window in his room. For the first time in his life, he thought of his future without worrying about it.

The response from Darren interrupted his thoughts:

Appreciate it, buddy. Life's been hard these past couple of years and I really needed to hear that tonight. Sorry if I killed the mood at the bonfire. I just couldn't hold in what I was going through anymore, and it just came spilling out of me uncontrollably. To be honest, I'm kind of tired of keeping all of my problems to myself. For the first time tonight, I feel free. Anyways, thanks to you I now know that I have someone who I can rely on to listen to me. Best of luck in all your college endeavors. You're a smart guy; you'll do well.

Jackson put his phone back on the bedside table and went back to sleep. He could always finish his calculus homework in the morning.

# Left Behind

**Sara Scott**

# Fences Around the Sea

**Elliot Eguia**

*Elijah!*
she called.
Mrs. Salaman stood at the foot of the porch, her shirt billowing in the ocean air that curled up the hill through the neighborhood. She isn't looking at me as I make my way down the sidewalk towards our home.

She is looking to the sea.

Her hair flies in mad flurries, flaring out and falling again as the waves push the breeze up the mainland. The setting sun hits the frames of her glasses as her head turns to me, her nose and cheeks a dull pink from the cold, salty wind.

*Elijah, my dear,*
She speaks to me as I stop in front of the gate that encloses our front yard.
It is only hip high.
I could jump it.
But I don't.

*Elijah, your father called.*

I don't want to speak to him.

# Air

**Rilee Garrett**

# Marble Veins

**Anna Callan**

The face was huge, with large white eyes that glared across the room, and stone lashes an inch long that were perpetually flushed against the delicate marble. Penelope's tan hands fluttered around them, swiping the feather duster across its surface and watching as specks flew from the statue's face. They caught the light as they drifted away, twirling in the air like miniature dancers on the breeze. Soft music was playing from an old radio in the background, filling the air with a dream-like quality as the piano music gently filled the studio.

Penelope's soft humming was the color of honey, sweet and rich, and followed the melody of the piano, without a care for the mistakes she made in trying to keep up. The statue regarded her as one would a fierce enemy on the battlefield, frozen in the act of pulling out a sword with hatred on its face.

The sweet stillness of the moment shattered with the entrance of the sculptor himself. Frederick pushed the swinging door open with his hip, carrying piles of reference books in his hands and swearing as his foot caught the doorjamb. The reference books plummeted to the floor, sending printed stock photos scattering across the studio. Penelope stared, wide-eyed, unable to process the quick turn of events and still stuck in her reverie.

"Pen!" Frederick snapped. "Help me out here!" He was bracing himself against another statue, bracing his weight against its stone thigh and rubbing his stubbed toe through his shoe. He swore under his breath, grimacing as Penelope lumbered down the ladder she'd been perched on.

"Are you okay?" Penelope's voice cut through Frederick's griping, and he sent her an annoyed look.

"I'm fine, Pen, just hurt like hell. Pick those up, will you?"

Penelope nodded, feeling stupid for not taking to the task immediately. Her limbs felt like wet cement today, moving much slower than they were meant to.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Frederick. You startled me, is all-"

Frederick's demeanor turned on a dime, no longer giving her those critical side-eyes but instead sending her a conspiratorial grin. "Please, sweetheart, we've been over this. Call me Fred." He winked, and Penelope turned away, gathering the reference books in silence.

Frederick seemed to make it his life goal to run his studio's assistants into the ground in one way or another. Penelope was one among 12, all vying to get on the sculptor's best side despite the distaste most held for him. He was a famous, well-received artist, especially given how stone-working had been steadily dying as an art form since the turn of the 20th century, and his approval could mean a foot in the door of an industry that was notoriously exclusive. Frederick would berate some, and harass others, but his one consistently irritating quality was his own arrogance.

She set the reference books on his desk, trying her best to arrange them quickly so she could return to her previous task. She carefully placed the loose papers she'd scooped up from the floor within the books, aware that Frederick was watching carefully. Her eyes caught on one concept sketch that appeared new. Against her better judgement, her eyes lingered on the statue, taking in Frederick's creation.

The drawing was of a woman, her arms raised in front of her as if she was examining them, a delighted surprise plain on her face. Her mouth was turned up in a cautious smile, her youth plain in the dimples of her cheeks and the round shape to her eyes. Her body was hidden away beneath layers that resembled the clothing of Ancient Greek statues, but that hadn't stopped Frederick's imagination from running wild with her proportions.

Penelope's eyes traced over the woman's face again, taking in the childish delight. Her skin crawled with distaste.

"Like her? I think she's one of my favorites." Frederick

leaned over his desk into her space, murmuring the words like they were a secret. Penelope twisted away, laying the drawing on the table and straightening her back as she took several quick steps away.

"Why is she surprised?" The question left her without permission, her heart hammering angrily away at his intrusion into her personal space and not allowing any pause for how her words might sound to Frederick, who she had come to know had trouble accepting any kind of critique, imagined or otherwise.

Thankfully, Frederick didn't seem to be upset, rather, he seemed to relish in Penelope engaging with him. He smiled slowly, holding the drawing up for her to see. "This, Pen, is Galatea. She's the first in a new series. Are you familiar with the myth of Pygmalion?"

While technically being a question, Frederick looked as if he considered it rhetorical; his eyes glinted in anticipation of teaching Penelope something. She shook her head, staring at the drawing of Galatea.

"Not to worry!" Frederick's smile crept wider and wider across his face. "Pygmalion was a sculptor in ancient Rome, or so the myth goes. No woman could hold his gaze for very long, as he couldn't fall in love with anyone except his perfect match. He created her from the stone he carved for a living, and fell madly in love with her. He named her Galatea, and prayed to the goddess of love to bring her to life for him. She did, and Galatea and Pygmalion lived their lives happily together, deeply in love." Frederick observed his own drawing with fondness. "She'll be getting a Pygmalion soon, but for now, she's just one half of a whole."

Penelope fidgeted, with herself, her eyes darting over Frederick's shoulder to the statue she'd abandoned to help him. "I see." She forced out, focusing her sight back on his creased, lazy smile.

"I thought you might. We've always been on the same page with conceptual stuff, I think." He placed the drawing back onto his desk, turning away from her, and Penelope took this as her cue to get back to work.

After dusting the statue fully, she worked a polish onto its marble surface, feeling her arms burn with the exercise. Frederick had switched off the radio, complaining of the dis-

traction and an oncoming headache, so the air was silent save for the scratches of his pencils on paper. The bright, rapturous light of golden hour had passed, leaving the studio increasingly dark and stifling as the night bore on. Finally, as the clock on her phone neared 8, Penelope finished the statue she'd been finalizing for next month's show, taking a step back to take it in as a whole.

Frederick's voice grated on her ears. "Tomorrow I want you to take another look at his left arm, its shine isn't matching the right one." Penelope lolled her head to the side, feeling the overworked muscles in her neck shift as she did. Frederick wasn't even looking at the statue. "Yes, sir." Her voice came out small and tired.

Penelope gathered her things, wandering out into the hall without giving a goodbye to him. Her backpack settled between her shoulder blades, digging into her skin with the corners of the various tools and laptop she carried within it. The D.C. nocturnal cityscape greeted her when she stepped outside, the comfort and isolation of the studio's golden hour long gone. Her mind drifted as she made her way down two blocks to the metro entrance, with only a small part of her consciousness paying any attention to the crowd. She had been lucky to land the assistantship for Frederick, but she cursed his chosen hub of business for being one of the worst cities she had ever encountered. Penelope had been raised in Virginia's rural isolation, only going to the city for college, and only staying for the art world's bizarre insistence on city life.

Her apartment was silent when she finally stepped inside, her keys jingling in the emptiness. Her roommates were gone by now- it was happy hour by now, and they had mentioned wanting to celebrate together for one's recent engagement. Penelope had politely declined to join them, lying instead that she had more work to be done from home than usual. Thankfully, they hadn't asked what on earth a sculptor could do from home; Penelope didn't know either of them very well, and she was sure they had only offered to be polite.

The night passed by in silence, with Penelope drawing in her room. Her mind wandered to Frederick's drawing of Galatea, and with her curiosity piqued, she absentmindedly searched the internet for the myth.

Penelope's eyes swept across the website she'd pulled up, her brows furrowing as she read about the supposed lovers.

Hatred was Pygmalion's only companion for many years- hatred for women and what he saw as the simplicity of their minds, their simpering and deceitful natures. Women turned away from his countenance, fearful and hurt by his unknowable anger, but Pygmalion would not be dissuaded from his rage. However detestable he found the living woman to be, he was still entranced by beauty. In desperation, he created Galatea to be his other half- the perfect woman to calm his anger. Pygmalion fell in love, for her beauty was only amplified by her silence, but her face was cold as stone, and her marble veins held no life in them. He prayed to Venus that she would grant life to Galatea, and so it was done in love's name. Galatea became Pygmalion's, and he became her only love.

Penelope's brows were furrowed with alarm as she read the small paragraph over again, eyes tracing over the words disbelievingly. Her mind's eye conjured the image of Frederick's Galatea once more, and the carefully-constructed delight on her face at her own creation. She laid down, her mind playing over the myth again and again, with a bad taste left in her mouth. Her dreams were filled with marble hands grasping at her, some turning humanly soft and cruel, others staying smooth and cold and comforting.

Penelope brushed the cloth over the statue's left arm, working a second coat of polish into the stone as she ignored Frederick's off-key singing. The morning had come too quickly, and she had been late after fighting against the comfortable warmth of her bed's hold. Her sleep had been disturbed, leaving her tossing and turning, though she couldn't remember what had frightened her about the dreams she had.

Frederick sauntered over to her, smiling at her in a much too friendly way. "That's the ticket," he smiled conspiratorially at her. "Can't have our art looking shoddy, now, can we?"

Penelope shook her head, keeping her eyes focused on the arm. Frederick's smile melted off his face.

"I don't appreciate the attitude, Penny." His voice was cold, and she felt her heart jump out of her chest in a panic.

"I'm not upset!" Her eyes turned to him, wide and

worried, desperate to fix his mood and cursing herself for not playing along. "I'm sorry, I'm just tired this morning, I didn't mean to have an attitude-"

Frederick held up a hand and Penelope felt her words stop without her consent. She held her breath, waiting as Frederick studied the statue, appearing to collect himself. Finally, he smiled at her, his gaze half-lidded.

"Don't worry about it, sweetheart. I just get worried about you when you're not smiling." He pat her on the arm, and Penelope turned back to the statue, feeling sick to her stomach as she replayed how quickly she had caved.

Frederick grabbed something from his desk and wandered back over to where Penelope was standing on the ladder, holding the sheet out to her. Penelope turned her eyes to it, and felt sick to her stomach as she took in the drawing of Galatea, now edited to be partially nude.

"I thought Pygmalion would have created her to be a little bit less modest than I had her originally. What do you think?" Penelope ignored the way his eyes wandered up her form until they landed on her face, instead choosing to take the sheet from his hands under the guise of studying it closer.

She felt a wave of sadness overcome her. "I think you're right."

The studio door opened, and Penelope looked up to see Shannon walk in, twisting her scarf away from her neck and smiling at the two of them brightly. Shannon was the newest hire, and hadn't yet seen the worst of their employer.

Frederick gently took the paper from Penelope's hands and held it out to Shannon, watching as Shannon carefully studied the drawing. If Shannon was put off by the drawing, she didn't show it, instead complimenting the way the fabric fell over Galatea's legs. She and Frederick conversed quietly about the statue's finer points, and Penelope turned back to her work.

"I was actually just about to ask for volunteers to pose for this piece, if either of you are interested?" Frederick's voice cut through Penelope's calm silence, and she felt her stomach drop out from her body.

It was silent. Shannon started chuckling nervously. "I, uh, don't think I'd do well with modeling. I wanted to be the sculptor for a reason."

"Shame." Frederick's voice was cheerful. "What about you, Penelope?"

Penelope flushed, feeling embarrassed at being embarrassed, angry that he would even ask, ashamed that she considered it.

"I would only use your face, of course." Frederick assured her. Penelope turned to look at him, surprise coloring her voice.

"Oh- I thought- Okay, I can do that!" Penelope said, relief drawing her face up into a smile.

"If you're okay with posing nude, of course, then that would be preferable, but-"

"No, thank you." Penelope's smile disappeared.

Frederick chuckled and went about setting up his materials, gathering tools and busying himself around the studio excitedly, getting everything in place to begin a clay model. Shannon caught her eye and gave her a slightly scandalized look, surprise and relief both evident in her eyes. Penelope forced herself to grimace as if it was just some minor inconvenience, a slip up that meant nothing save obliviousness.

Penelope found herself sitting in front of Frederick, watching as he molded the clay slowly into the shape of her head.

"I'm starting with just your neck up," He said, focusing intently on the burgeoning shape he was crafting. "So I can refine it, and I'll do bigger one later. But first I wanna make sure everything..." His eyes wandered up to her face, furrowing his brow. "...works for the piece. Ease up, you look like you got in a fight. We're going for delight and surprise, here."

Penelope deeply did not want to, but she forced her face into an expression of surprise, trying to keep it from getting as ridiculous as the drawing was. Frederick tutted, and reached a hand out to pull at her face, pushing her cheeks up into an open-mouthed smile, and drawing her eyebrows up high on her forehead, wet clay lining his path.

"Sorry bout that." He grinned, and Penelope wanted desperately to hit him.

"It's fine." She ground out, maintaining the expression he had placed her in.

Penelope held her position for hours, letting Frederick carve out her face in the clay with small breaks in between the

hours. Shannon busied herself with taking over for Penelope's usual jobs, sweeping the studio of the dust that collected on the floor each morning and glancing over every once in a while to observe curiously.

Penelope had the feeling that if anyone else had asked her to hold such a ridiculous position, that she would have been giggling often, unable to take it seriously. But with Frederick watching her, Penelope felt as if she wasn't allowed to be in on the joke.

At last, Frederick finished carving the clay model and stood back from it, taking it in with a smile. "I think you're a natural fit for this statue." He clapped her on the shoulder, throwing an arm around her. "I do hope that you'll consider modeling for the rest of it? I know I was joking earlier, but I think you'll really bring the statue to life." His grip tightened on her shoulder for a moment, as if trying to be encouraging.

Penelope slowly nodded. "I'll think about it."

Shannon broke the silence, smiling an uneasy smile as she wandered away. Penelope had forgotten she was even here. "I've got to get going, but I'll see you all Monday!"

Penelope nodded, and Frederick waved goodbye as he wandered away to wash his hands of the clay. Penelope stared at the back of the clay model's head, wanting to see it but unsure she would like the final product.

"Are you good to close up?" She looked up to see Frederick shrugging on his coat. She nodded, feeling like her throat was closing. He smiled and saluted her before walking out, whistling a jaunty tune.

Penny turned her eyes to the clay model, circling it to see its face.

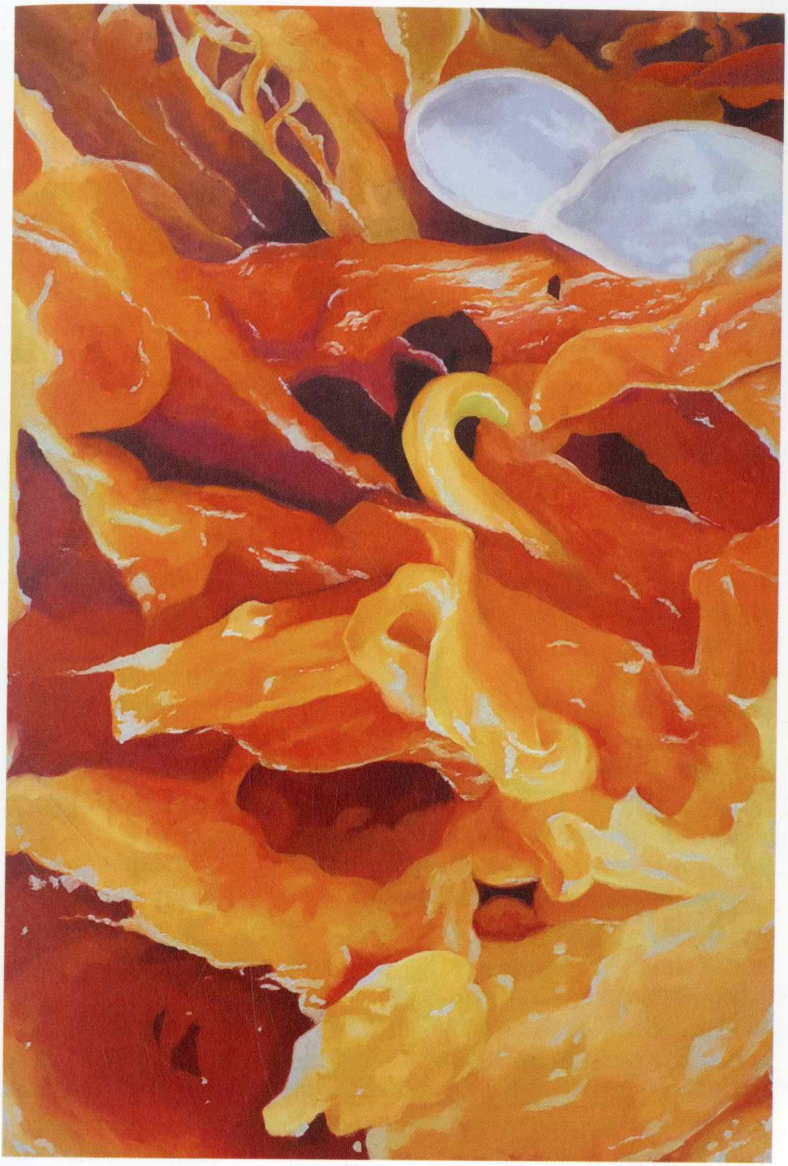
Her own eyes stared back at her, but they were not really hers. They were empty, delighted and happy, but lacking any life or thought. Her mouth was turned up in a broad smile, her lips overly filled in where Frederick evidently thought she'd been lacking. Her face was a bastardized imitation, and she felt a sudden surge of anger. This was not her.

She watched her hands flash out as if they had a mind of their own, grasping the wet clay and smushing it with her thumbs, pushing the face in on itself. She dragged the lips away from their place, swirling them against the overly dainty nose.

The eyes fell apart under her touch, and she tore at the carved strands of hair at the crown of the model's head. Wet clay splattered away from the model, coating her clothes and skin in light grey specks.

Panting, she pulled her fist back and slammed it on the top of the model's head, landing in a thick fold of clay with a final, unsatisfying thump.

Moments passed. Penelope pulled her fist away from the clay as gently as she could, feeling her eyes widen as she took in the model's disfigured appearance. Terror rose in her, and she slowly paced around the ruined model, feeling adrenaline pump through her veins. Slowly, Penelope felt a smile pulling at her lips, as something like relief and real, genuine delight flooded her. She pictured the look on Frederick's face, beet red and sputtering, and she lost herself to laughter in the dark studio.



# Rot

**Sara Scott**

# Clawfoot

**Donovan Cleckley**

"The courage to live: I keep hidden what needs to be hidden and needs to irradiate in secret."
- Clarice Lispector, Água Viva (1973)

a bathtub fills with lukewarm water
with soap providing a frothy cover,
but my nakedness remains exposed,
still so unshielded by the bubbles,
battered like driftwood,
as a deceased lover

he strikes the wild match,
as he makes his choice,
whatever he decides,
it must be his
to own all rapture
in these burned moors

whether the ashes define his art,
taking him down a path untraveled,
he must never see the oak tree
and assume the absence of rottenness,
silently nibbling at its tender roots
and decaying the rings of its heart

he makes men up inside his head,
as Plath once saw the world drop dead
in the blackness of eyes closed,
but all men are the most dangerous game.
hunter or prey, desires, even if reversed,
exist as much of the same

good boys and girls act straight,
playing it safe,

living confined
to the reality of the closet cage.

I lie, smile, and laugh with the girls,
but, deep within,
I drown in the dirty little secrets
of the man-made world.
seldom do men
tell the truths of their bodies,
as they try to prevent women
from ever doing so.

together, we lie and lie and lie
for what feels like forever.

the pale vessel overflows,
but the emptiness of my body
fills the space.
every bubble, clinging to me,
seems like blown glass,
although air and gas,
full and hollow.
each bubble fights
to hold my hand
in the fully empty bathtub.

a line once drawn
upon the foggy mirror fades
as this body lays submerged,
just washed and still unclean,
like sunken music
left unheard in this place.

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